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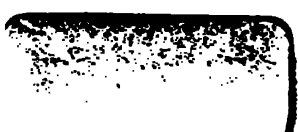


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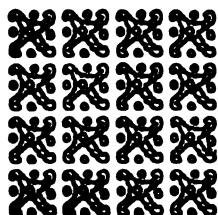






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To

MY OLD FRIEND

COULSON KERNAHAN



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THE PLANTERS



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I

LIZZIE DOLAN was in bad humour; and so, more than once that morning, Hughy Fitch and Peter Jarmin had told each other. She looked sour, they thought, nipped, too old for her years; her tongue had an edge; a pig with six legs wouldn't make her laugh; when you spoke she eyed you with an eye like a hawk's, and answered as if you were a beggar with a meal bag; she wasn't herself at all, they said, not the least bit.

What ailed her? Hughy and Peter wondered. Had she slept on nettles? Had she got out o' bed wrong side? Had the ould mother bothered her? Was she in trouble of any kind? Was the work too much for her? asked Hughy of Peter, at last, and resting on his spade glanced round at Lizzie, as, bending low, she went dropping seed-cuts adown the long strip of manure that ran straight for Emo valley. Was the work too much for her? asked Hughy and let his eyes rest steadily upon her. All woe-ful and bedraggled she looked. Her skirt was bunched about her waist; a sack-cloth apron (a *praskeen*, so called) bulging with seed-cuts swung against her knees; she wore an old jacket, out at elbows and fastened at the neck with a brass brooch, hob-nailed boots, a black quilted petti-coat and a tweed cap; her hair was in wisps, her face was wind-chapped and her wrists and hands; she looked pinched, Hughy thought, hungry, cheerless.

"I wonder now," said he, turning again to his furrow

and driving his spade firmly into the stiff lea, "if it's that'd be ailin' her? I wonder?"

"What?" asked Peter, and hung for a moment on his spade-shaft. "What?" asked he.

"Why that the work'd be too much for her," answered Hughy, turning a sod and breaking it across the ridge. "It's hard on the back, an' it's wearisome . . . an' sure the weather's ojus bitter."

Peter sniffed disdainfully, spat on his hands, and drove hard with his foot. He was a small man of about thirty-seven, dark, lean, ugly, of none too cheerful an aspect; about as much like his fellow planter as a potato is like a turnip.

"Ach," said he, "quit wi' ye! Hard on the back, indeed! I wonder what her back was made for? I wonder what easier work you'd find for the likes of her nor what she's at? Hard on the back! Naw; it's not that," said Peter, with a wag of his head. "It's not that. She knew what was before her when she agreed to come; right well she knew. Says I to her: 'Hughy Fitch an' meself have shares in a piece o' *conacre* over Emo way; is it yourself agrees to cut seed for us, an' spread the manure, an' all the rest, if we give you an' the mother a hand at the turf an' another at the harvestin'? Will ye do that?' says I. 'I will,' says she; an' the bargain was struck. Hard on the back, indeed," Peter went on with a sniff; "an' a powerful soft job it'll be drivin' this danged spade through stiff lea from sunrise to sunset. Aw, yis, indeed!"

"It's true," said Hughy. "I wouldn't deny it."

"Naw, it's not to be denied, so it's not. People must

ate; and praties must grow; and people must work. There's for ye."

"True," answered Hughy again. "True for ye."

"Every time I turn me spade and clout a sod over the eye o' one o' them boy-os," Peter continued, looking at one of the seed-cuts that lay on the ridge below him, "there's another mouthful on its way to the pot come next winter—if so be the divil doesn't set his cloots on the bit o' *conacre* and scatter the blight over it."

Hughy straightened his long back, rested hands on spade-head and breast on hands; and with a smile playing at the corners of his slow good-natured eyes, looked sideways at Peter.

"Ye think it's the divil, then, does these things?" said he. "Sends the blight, an' the rot, an' all that?"

"An' who else'd send them?" returned Peter, looking up at his partner much as a sparrow looks at the sky. "Why, to be sure it is. An' what the blazes does it matter, anyway, who sends them? They come; an' that's enough for me. If that pratie there rots, I blame the divil; if it breeds the full o' me hat, I thank the Lord for it. There's how I'll be seein' things."

Hughy shifted his feet; looked across the field, sought Emo hill and the hills beyond Thrasna river with a slow thoughtful gaze; glanced over his shoulder at Lizzie and went on delving.

"Ay, I know. Ye talk like a school-master. . . . An' it's the ould boy himself ye'd be blamin', now," asked Hughy, "for that east wind that's blowin' razors at us through the hedge? Would that be it, Peter?"

"I'd be thinkin' so," came across the ridge.

"An' himself, too, sends the hard winter, an' the hunger, an' keeps the spring back, and hides the sun away somewhere behind the clouds! Would ye be thinkin' that, Peter?"

"I'd not be denyin' it."

"Aw yis," drawled Hughy; "aw yis. An' you'd be of opinion, mebbe, that he had somethin' to do wi' keepin' women out drudgin' in a day that's fit to blow holes in a snipe? Eh, Peter?"

"Ah, there ye are again," snapped Peter; "there ye are again wi' your gossoon's bleather! Didn't I tell ye? Didn't I say it was a bargain? Didn't I?" Peter straightened himself and shot out an arm. "An' what the blazes worse off is she, I ax ye again, nor you or me? Hasn't she clothes on her? Hasn't she as much to ate and drink? Does all the wind come flutterin' at her skirts, d'ye imagine? Has she as much to do, or as hard? Answer me, will ye?"

"She's a woman," answered Hughy.

"Aw, a woman." Peter sniffed. "A woman! Sure I forgot. Aw, 'deed I did. An' you're a man. Aw, yis. I was forgettin' that too. Mebbe you'd like to change places, Hughy. Or mebbe you'd like to do her work as well as your own?"

"Naw. It's not that . . . I'm just pityin' the crature."

"I know." Peter nicked out a sod. "I know. Well, that's your affair. For me—well, I dunno. God knows I often pity meself. Look at me elbow stickin' through the ould coat. Look at the bones cuttin' through me

skin. How often does the inside o' me know what full means? How long would it be since I smoked a whole ounce o' tobacco inside o' one blessed week? . . . Aw, yis. You pity the crature. An' so do I. But between herself and me there's about as much to choose as between one side o' the spade an' t'other. Jist as much: an' for all I can see, it's poor Peter Jarmin—God love him—that has the worst o' the deal."

Hughy did not answer. The partners worked on for a while; then said Peter:

"Suppose ye ax her, Hughy, what'd be troublin' her?"

"I'd—I'd be fearin', Peter. Mebbe she'd take it ill."

"Phat, man! She wouldn't ate ye. Sure hard words 'll not break your neck."

"Naw." Hughy looked back at Lizzie. "That's true, sure enough." He raised a hand to his mouth and moved as if to shout; hesitated; leant a while on his spade; raised hand again and called: "*Hoi-i-i*, Lizzie."

One arm skimbo and the other weighed with her bulging *prasken*, Lizzie was gazing dolefully across Emo bog; now, at sound of Hughy's call, she turned, looked at him a moment, and without answering stooped to her work. Again came the call; and again, in a little while: "*Hoi-i-i*, Lizzie." She stood upright and turned towards the planters.

"Well, what is it?"

"Haven't ye had enough o' yourself out there?" answered Hughy. "Come up here an' give us a crack."

"Ach, g' luck," cried Lizzie and stooped. "Crack, indeed!"

"Come on wi' ye," persisted Hughy. "We're as lonesome, the two of us, as cranes on a tree. Come on now." Lizzie did not answer. "Ach, don't be so stubborn. Come on wi' ye, woman alive. . . . That's right," said Hughy, drawing forth his pipe, as Lizzie turned and came tramping over the grass and between the manure heaps towards him. "That's right. Sakes alive, woman, you're as hard to bring from the work as an ass from a carrot bed."

Peter chuckled over his spade-head. Lizzie stopped.

"I'll be thankin' ye, Hughy Fitch," said she. "Is it for the compliment ye called me?"

Hughy reddened; scratched his ear; moved his feet.

"Och now," said he; "och now! . . . Ah, I'll be meanin' nothin', Lizzie. Ah, no. Sure, there was no harm. Ah, no. Sure I only wanted to say——"

"Ach, quit wi' ye," Peter broke in. "Sure you've as many excuses as if you'd ate her dinner. Don't we know ye didn't mean anythin' . . . An' how's yourself, Lizzie, *machree*?" Peter pulled out his pipe and softly began tapping its bowl upon his palm. "Faith, an' it's not over bright you're lookin' this mornin', now. What's up wi' ye?"

"Nothin's up, Peter Jarmin. Ye called me?" said Lizzie, and looked at Hughy.

"Now I wouldn't be strivin' too hard," Peter went on, nor gave Hughy chance for a word. "Ye know the wind's powerful keen, an' there might be a frost the night; an' if so be ye got too far ahead of us, it's only winded the sets'd be, an'——"

"Thank ye for nothin', Peter Jarmin. Ye called

me!" said Lizzie again, and not so much as gave Peter the blink of an eye as she looked at Hughy.

"Aw, I did." Slowly Hughy made answer, leisurely he sat him down on the edge of a ridge. "'Twas Peter there put it in me head. Says he——"

"I see," Lizzie broke in, with a vicious tap of her foot and a scornful toss of the head. "I know. 'Twas Peter put it in your head, indeed!" She turned to go. "Well I'm obliged to the both o' ye—an' I say that to you, Peter Jarmin, first of all."

"But, Lizzie!" Hughy looked up, wonderment quick on his great moon face. "I didn't—I—What in glory——?"

"Ah, be quiet wi' ye," snapped Peter over his shoulder; "be quiet an' light your wits instead o' your pipe. . . . Aisy, Lizzie; aisy, ye girl ye. Now, don't go; don't. Troth an' soul we'd be glad o' your company, for it's dull we are as bog water. Come back an' I'll tell ye a story. Och, do!"

But Peter's wheedling availed nothing. Slowly Lizzie walked on, head back, eyes fixed straight before her; nor stopped even when a heavy foot came hurrying after and a hand was laid on her shoulder.

"Let me go, Peter Jarmin," cried she. "How dare ye, air!" She wheeled about; then drew back a step and dropped her eyes. "Aw, it's you, is it?" she said. "It's you!"

"Ay, answered Hughy. "It's me. What, in glory, ails ye, Lizzie? Why, you'd think—I—I was tryin' to drive ye away, that quick ye are to turn tail. Come back wi' ye, now. Come back or, be the king, I'll shake ye!"

Lizzie kicked at a clod. "Why didn't ye keep me when I was there?"

"Keep ye? Lord knows, woman, one'd think ye were a child! Didn't I ask ye to come? Wasn't I pityin' ye out there in the cowl'd? Didn't I want ye to stay?"

"Did ye now? . . . Sure I thought it was Peter."

"'Twas meself." Hughy took her by the arm. "Back ye come."

"Amn't I as well where I am?" said Lizzie, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Naw. Back ye come."

"Ye think three'll be better company nor two?" said Lizzie, turning and smiling.

"I think nothin'. Back ye come."

Hughy stood Lizzie in front of Peter, spilled the contents of her *praskeen* upon the grass, brought an empty sack across from the hedge and spread it behind her. "Now rest yourself," said he, and sat him down once more; "an' no more o' your capers." Lizzie sat down upon the sack, gathered up her knees and clasped them with both hands. "Sure that was no way at all to be treatin' us—no way at all. You'd think we had offended ye—ye would so. . . . Ha' we offended ye?" Hughy asked. "Because——" He stopped. "Because——"

"Just so," said Peter, with a chuckle. "*Because.*"

"Ah, quit your nonsense, Hughy," cried Lizzie from the sack. "Offended me? Arrah how? Naw. It's not that—it's not that at all."

"Ay?" said Hughy and Peter in a breath. "Ay?"

"Naw, it's not that. . . . It's just *everything*."

"Ay?" came again. "Ay, now?"

"I feel this mornin'," Lizzie went on, her eyes fixed on the dour greyness of the sky, "as if me grave was open. I couldn't laugh if ye paid me for it. I can do nothin' right. If I drop a set it's sure to fall wrong; it's Heaven's mercy I didn't cut me thumb off long ago wi' the seed-knife, or drive the grape through me foot. I'm all wrong; an', God knows, I feel as cross as fifty cats in a sack."

"Ay?" Peter laid his spade along the ridge and sat down upon it. "Well, we were sayin' ye didn't look yourself this mornin', Lizzie. Yis, we were."

"I can't return the compliment, Peter Jarmin," returned Lizzie, with a flash of her dark eyes; "for you're just the same as ye always are, just as . . . Niver mind. Mebbe if I'm not meself"—she glanced at Hughy—"I'm not without reason. Aw, no. It isn't for nothin' ivery cow hangs a tail behind her, so it isn't."

"It's truth," answered Peter, and elbows on knees and chin between his palms looked hard and critically at the girl. "It's truth."

Hughy crossed his legs, leant sideways on an elbow, took pipe from lips and narrowly looked at it; then raised his eyes. "An' what'd be the cause o' you havin' a tail, now," said he.

Peter laughed. Hughy's face grew redder. "I'm usin' your own words, Lizzie," he went on hurriedly. "I know what you mean; an' *you* know what I mean; an'——"

"Rightly I do, Hughy," said Lizzie and gave him the

benefit of her eyes; "rightly I know, an' them that laugh has little else to do. But sure—but sure Aw," cried she, with a sudden sound of wailing, "surely the Lord never made a worse day nor this. It's woeful. Look at the sky that dreary an' angry-lookin', an' it that low ye could touch it with a pole. Look at the cowl'd, grey, hungry appearance there's iverywhere. Look at the fields as dead as the road, an' the bare hedges, an' the starvin' trees. An' that wind," shivered Lizzie inside her flimsy jacket, "sure it's enough to cut holes in ye. Ah Lord, Lord!"

The planters sat looking, now at Lizzie, now up and down the bleak potato field, now across the cowering hills, now up at the pitiless sky: it was truth, thought they, this that Lizzie had said; never had they seen a sorrier day, never seen old Ireland more nakedly God-forsaken.

"It's truth," said Peter, with a wag of his head. "Ay, it is so," Hughy chimed in and puckered his brow; "it is so."

"You'd think," Lizzie went on, "that niver again could the sun shine, or the sky show its face. Sure it's woeful. It's worse nor frost an' snow; it's worse nor the floods. I can stand most things; but a day like that—ugh!" shivered the girl again; "it's miserable. I could just die."

The men sat staring at her. She was in very queer humour, they thought; was like a sick child, with her peevishness and her humours. Never before had they seen Lizzie Dolan just like that.

"Yis; it's bad I allow." Peter looked round. "Still, there's niver a bad but there's a worse behind it."

"Aw, just so," assented Hughy, with his eyes on Lizzie's face. "Just so."

"Worse!" Lizzie flung out a hand. "Worse, ye say? An' how? How could things be worse? Would we be worse if we were flat in our graves? Look at us here like snipes in a ditch, shiverin' an' famished; look at the sky, an' the fields, an'—Ah, dear Lord, will the spring *niver* come; will it *niver*, *niver* come?"

"It will, Lizzie *agra*," answered Peter; "as sure as gun's iron it will. It'll take us all of a sudden just like a smack from a blackthorn—an' then where'll your misery an' your graves be? Ay, indeed. Out like a nine days' lamb you'll be, friskin' yourself in the sunshine. Aw, ay."

"Ah, quit your bleather, Peter Jarmin," answered Lizzie. "You an' your friskin'! Just as if 'twas in short clothes I was, an' me with nothin' better to think of but sportin' in the fields. 'Deed, ay! A lot o' friskin' poor me'll get, spring or no spring—a danged lot! Will I be any beter off *then* nor I am now, I'm askin' ye, Peter Jarmin?"

"Och, ye might. Who knows? Sure it's wonderful the way things change. Round goes the wind an' away goes the rain."

"Ay, it does. An' a lot o' chance there is o' the wind changin' for the likes o' me." Bitterly Lizzie spoke and involuntarily glanced at Hughy, as leaning forward he sat peering steadily into her eyes.

"Och, ye never know," said Peter in his sage way. "Anyway, sure it might be as well to wait an' see."

Lizzie tossed her head. "Ah, it's aisy to talk," said she peevishly; "mighty aisy. What can you know, Peter Jarmin, you or Hughy? You're your own masters the both o' ye."

"Are we, faith!" Peter screwed up his lips and laughed.

"Yis ye are," cried Lizzie. "Ye can't do as ye like, but ye can do somethin'. If ye wanted to start to Ameriky the morrow, ye could sell your trifles an' start. If ye . . . I wish to God I could start," said Lizzie. "I wish it wi' all me heart."

"Aw!" Peter and Hughy spoke in a breath. "Aw, now!"

"I'm tired of this hand to mouth, dog in the pot kind o' life," Lizzie went on quickly. "I'm sick of it. Look at the two of us, the ould mother an' meself, over yonder all be ourselves, niver knowin' where the bit's to come from, or the rag for our backs, or how long the roof'll be over us. Look at her, a widdy woman, strivin' to keep the bit o' land, strugglin' to pay the rent wi' pounds o' butter an' dozens of eggs an' odd flocks o' ducks an' turkeys. Look at her failin' in health, an' no one to help her much, wi' meself knittin' socks all the day an' spriggin' me eyes out all the night; an'—Ah, what's the use o' talkin'? It's a dog's life, I say, a dog's! The two o' ye know nothin' about it. Women! Ah, God help the poor women, say I," cried Lizzie, and from her cheek wiped off a bitter tear.

Peter looked at his boots and found never a word to say. He was beginning to pity the girl. What she said was true enough. She had her troubles like all else. It

was a shame that such things should be. Still, thought he with a shake of his head; still——

“She’s as cross as the divil,” cried Lizzie. “She’s always naggin’ at me. She says I’m lazy, an’ stubborn, an’ peevish. She made the breakfast choke in me throat this mornin’ wi’ her tonguin’. I do me best,” cried the girl; “I do me best; an’ I know she’s troubled. But Aw, I wish to God I could get away somewhere. From me heart I do.”

Hughy sat rubbing a crumb of tobacco round and round between his palms, his penknife sticking out between thumb and forefinger, pipe head downward in his mouth. His heart was sore for the girl. He wished he could help the crature. He wished he could make life easier for her, could take some of the trouble from her. His heart was sore for her—but what could he do? He liked her well. She was a bright, good-hearted, decent girl. It was God’s pity of her He minded when he used to sit before the fire with Lizzie at his side. They were bright days those. Ay. But—but times got bad; her mother’s tongue and temper were hard to bear: somehow he had quit sitting with Lizzie before the fire. . . . Ah, ’twas a pity of the crature, he thought, and crammed the tobacco into his pipe bowl; ’twas a powerful pity: but—but what could he do? He looked again at Lizzie; met her eyes; reddened; looked down; in a while dared another glance and found her gathering the scattered seed-cuts into her *prasken*. He rose hurriedly and crossed the ridge.

“Aisy,” said he. “Aisy, till I help ye, Lizzie.” He stooped; and as he did so Peter knelt over and gathered

a double handful of the cuts. "Aisy," said Peter; "aisy now, ye girl ye."

But already Lizzie had turned away. "I'm thankful to ye both," said she over her shoulder; "but sure I'm loth to be troublin' ye." And off stepped Lizzie.

Peter squatted on his heels; Hughy rested hands on knees and stood looking after her. They saw her reach the fire which burned beside the lane hedge, saw her sit down on a pile of turf and begin slicing potatoes into seed-cuts: then they looked at each other, and without a word turned to their spades.

"Ay," said Peter as he spat on his hands. "Aw, just so."

"Yis," said Hughy and put away his pipe.

A while passed; then said Peter again:

"I'm thinkin' I know now what'd be ailin' her."

"Ay," answered Hughy in his slow way; "mebbe ye do, Peter."

And after that, till dinner-time had come, no word passed between the planters.

II

"THERE'S no clock in the sky the day," Peter said, looking up as if in search of the sun; "but be the feel o' things it must be dinner-time. Come away, Hughy." And Peter set off towards the fire.

Hughy finished off the end of a ridge; threw his spade into the furrow, clasped hands behind his back, and slowly followed Peter. Presently he turned; let his eyes wander

over the ridges and rest upon a bedraggled figure that swayed to and fro among the manure heaps; grunted and turned; turned again and muttered; without more ado began retracing his steps.

"It's the devil's work for a woman," he mumbled as he went; then, coming closer to the figure, raised his voice. "It's dinner-time," said he; "there or thereabouts."

"Is it?"

"Yis. I—I thought I'd tell ye."

"I'm obliged to ye."

Hughy knitted his brow, pocketed his hands; let his weight rest now on this foot now on that as stolidly he stood looking at the girl.

"But—you're comin' over, Lizzie?"

"Naw, Hughy. I'm not."

"Eh? You're not! An' what" Words failed Hughy.

"I'm goin' over the bog to see Anne Daly." Lizzie stood upright, drove the prongs of her grape into a manure heap and stretched her arms. "She asked me this mornin' to go an' have a bite wi' her—an' I'm goin'."

"Aw," said Hughy. "I see. Then, that bein' so—we'd be powerful glad o' your company, Lizzie," he went on, looking wistfully at her—"if only you'd come."

"I'm thankful to ye, Hughy. Still, a promise is a promise."

"Ah, I know, I know. I wouldn't have ye—Aw, not at all." Hughy half turned away and stood looking at the grass. "Aw, not at all," said he; "not at all. Still——" Again he paused; and at that Lizzie went.

“Ay, *still*—” said she. “Mebbe you’ll know the rest be the time I get back.” And flinging a laugh over her shoulder, away she went across the ridge-tops.

Hughy bent his head, slowly crossed the field and came to the lane hedge. There in its shelter, a fire of peat burnt brightly; and beside it sat Peter Jarmin, his legs stretched out, his back against the half filled potato sack, and a great piece of rye bread in his hand. A bottle of cold tea stood warming by his foot; his hat hung jauntily across an eye; already had the fire drawn the blueness from his face: he looked comfortable, did Peter, and his lips went smacking with a relish over the cold dryness of his dinner.

Hughy rounded the fire; lifted his coat off the ditch, took from one pocket a bottle of milk and from the other a piece of soda bread knotted inside a red pocket handkerchief; threw the coat round his shoulders, kicked a couple of turf together and, with the fire between him and Peter, sat down. He untied the handkerchief, pulled out a clasp knife, slit his bread in half, stood one piece in the ashes against the sole of his boot and on the point of his knife held the other towards the fire to toast. His face was sober, thoughtful. Sometimes he shaded his eyes with a hand, sometimes drew his fingers slowly across his brow; now and then he turned head and looked in the direction that Lizzie had gone, once or twice caught the glint of Peter’s eyes through the smoke; but no word spoke he, and it was not till he had started on his second piece of toast that the sound of Peter’s voice came to him across the fire.

“Where was she off to?”

"To Fat Anne's."

"I know." Peter bit at his rye bread; and thereafter, but for the piping of the hedge, the smacking of lips, and the gurgle that came at intervals from the bottle-necks, silence reigned.

Peter finished; flung his empty bottle towards the ditch, buttoned his coat round his shoulders, and putting a coal in his pipe leant back against the potato sack. He felt mighty comfortable in body—full, tight, warm. He pulled down his hat brim, folded arms, closed eyes: but sleep he could not. Dang it, what ailed him? He shot out his legs, sat upright and looked across the fire: there, flat on his back, head on hands and hands on two turf, lay Hughy—and he wide awake as a hunted fox. Ho, ho; Hughy awake, too! 'Twas curious, thought Peter; mighty curious. He leant back, and began to think—to think hard and solemnly, even, to all appearance, as Hughy his partner, lying there beyond the fire, was thinking. With knitted brow and pursed-up lips and eyes cocked knowingly at the blaze, he sat brooding and smoking and scheming; then slapped his leg and leant forward.

"Yis," said he, half aloud. "Be the king, I'll do it. . . . Ye wouldn't be havin' a deck o' cards in your pocket, Hughy?" he asked through the smoke.

"Divil a one."

"Ay. Would ye be havin' a couple o' ha'pence, then, about ye?"

"I would."

Peter rose.

"Well then," said he, "suppose we have a while at

pitch an' toss in the lane? I'm off me sleep, somehow; an' the ground's hard; an'—Sure a game'll do us no harm anyway."

Hughy stretched up his arms, yawned, slowly rose.

"All right," said he, and looked—even as Peter was looking—across the bog towards the cottage of Fat Anne. "Divil a hair I care if I do."

The two went up the field and out into the lane that runs through Emo down towards Thrasna river; there, in the levellest spot they could find, set a stone as spud and began their game. Peter looked flushed, somewhat excited; Hughy pitched and tossed with zest if with less than his usual skill; in silence, almost in excitement, the partners played their boy's game between the piping hedges: after half an hour, every farthing of Hughy's tobacco money—some threepence sterling—was jingling in Peter's pocket, and sport was over.

"Well, divil take me luck," said Hughy as he turned to the gate.

"Aw, divil take it, indeed," answered Peter with a grin; "an' divil keep me mine. Well, come away Hughy, me son; it's bitter work again after our sport. Ay, ay . . . But—but," he went on, looking here and there across the potato field, "where's Lizzie? Sure she should be back be this . . . Well, no matter; she'll come in time." And soberly the two tramped back to their spades.

Half an hour went and brought no Lizzie.

"Well she's stretchin' her tether, anyway," said Peter, and for the twentieth time looked anxiously

towards Rhamus hill and the estate of the Dalys. "I wonder if anythin's come to her?"

"Arrah, not a thing," answered Hughy. "She's jist kaleyin' a while at Fat Anne's."

"H'm," grunted Peter. "Mebbe so, indeed. Well, it's time she was back. I'm weary waitin' for her. I've—I've—I'll give her ten minutes," cried Peter, "an' not a danged second more."

"Ay?" Hughy bent his back. "Aw, just so."

Ten minutes went and brought no Lizzie. Down went Peter's spade. "Well, dang me, if this isn't too bad," he shouted, "to weary one like this! I'll go an' bring her. I'll——" And at that Hughy's arm shot out and marked a figure coming slowly through the gloom that lay spread along the valley. "Stay where ye are, Peter," said he. "There she is."

Peter leant upon his spade, pulled down his hat and beneath its brim watched Lizzie wind through the heather and over the turf banks; watched her jump the drain that bounds the bog; watched her come to the potato field, and cross the ridges, and stoop to her work; watched her, for a while, go swaying here and there among the manure heaps, then suddenly let fall his spade and settled his hat firmly on his crown. "I'm wishful to say a word to her," said he to Hughy, and moved a step. "I—I have somethin' to say—Aw, I'll not be a jiffy," he broke off, with a wave of his hand. "I'll be back before you've covered as much ground as'd bury ye." And off went Peter.

Now Hughy Fitch was a simple fellow, big hearted and trusting; moreover, was Peter Jarmin's friend and neigh-

bour and partner; still, it must be said that, as Peter threw down his spade and went swinging over the grass towards Lizzie Dolan, Hughy's eyes held something like suspicion. What, in glory, was the man after? he asked himself. What was this he wanted to say? Peter had been strange in his ways these last few hours. There was a look in his face, a knowing twist in his eye, that he cared little for. Somehow, he was not trusting Peter. See him there, standing before Lizzie, hands in pockets, legs spraddled out, his head cocked as impudent as you please. What right had he to go to her, to talk to her, to stand before her in that fashion? What, in the king's name, was he saying? 'Twas something mighty strange, for see how Lizzie was staring at him. . . . Ah, he wished they were closer; he wished he could hear a word or two. There again! Out goes Peter's hand; up goes his voice; out goes t'other hand. Whisht! . . . Ah, not a word can he hear, not one. What, in glory, is he saying? What, in blazes, right has he to be saying anything? . . . There he is again, talking like an auctioneer. Now he—Eh? Is that Lizzie laughing? Ay, it is. See her head back, and her mouth open. Haw, haw. Good, Lizzie, good! Now Peter turns and glowers at the ground; wheels round once more; says another word or two; gets another laugh from Lizzie; bangs his hat on the grass; turns, and . . . It was time to be minding his own business, thought Hughy.

The afternoon wore on. Each at his furrow, and with no more than the width of a ridge between their elbows, the planters wrought steadily; and one to another spoke

never a word. Sometimes Peter muttered fiercely below his breath, or growled viciously as his spade struck a stone. Often enough Hughy stole a quick glance at his partner's face, and wondered to see how black it was and how fierce. Now and then a laugh swirled up on the wings of the wind; and hearing it, Hughy turned to see Lizzie holding her sides, but Peter swore between his teeth. At last—two hours maybe having gone since dinner-time—Lizzie passed on her way to the fire; and at sight of her stepping along, nose in the air and a smile on her lips, Peter snatched halter from his tongue and he turned and cried:

“The jade!” And again: “The hussy!”

“Ay!” Hughy raised his eyes. “Ay?”

“Look at her prancin' along. Look at the grin on her. The hussy!” cried Peter again. “The jade!”

Hughy kept silent. Lizzie sat down beside the fire and spread hands to the blaze. Fiercely Peter wielded his spade; fiercely, in a while, did he speak:

“She's a fool—an' impident fool! She laughed at me, scorned me. . . . I'm *not* an ould man,” cried Peter all suddenly; “I'm not ugly. Dang me, I'm as good a man any day as you, Hughy Fitch! Yis; I am.”

Hughy glanced up at Peter. “Sure nobody's denyin' it,” said he.

“Naw. I know. But—Aw, I know all about it. Says she to me: ‘Why I could cut a better man nor you out of Hughy yonder an' him niver to know.’ Could she, be jabers!” shouted Peter, flinging out an arm. “Why I've more brains to spare in me skull than'd make

a magistrate of ye. Ye hear that, Hughy Fitch? Ye hear me?"

"I hear," said Hughy, and smiled. "I hear ye."

"What has bulk or good looks to do wi' it?" Peter went on. "'Tisn't them makes a man no more than they make a woman. 'Twasn't *her* face or *her* size made me say what I did. Naw. 'Twas—Aw, dang me, if I know now what tempted me. The fool I was; the fool!"

Hughy kept silent. Peter turned a sod or two; then broke out afresh.

"To laugh at me, an' call me a fool; to scorn me because I gave her a chance to better herself! The jade; the hussy! But wait. Aw, wait till herself an' the ould mother comes on the parish an' I have the laugh at her. Just wait! It's then she'll mind the day I offered meself to her here in Emo townland—an' she laughed at me. An' I'll mind it too. Yis; aw, yis!"

Slowly Hughy rose to his full height; slowly looked round at Peter.

"I see," said he. "I see. That was it?" He whistled softly. "I see," he said again. "Oh, just so."

"The little fool!" said Peter. "Her that hasn't a farthin' to bless herself with; her that, be her own showin', is more dead nor alive; her to refuse a good house, an' three cows' place, an'—Phat!" cried Peter in utter disgust. "The fool!"

Hughy had been looking hard at Peter; now he put a foot on the ridge and leant towards him.

"I say, Jarmin," said he. "This'll be a mean kind o' trick you're after playin'."

"What?" snapped Peter.

“ Why didn’t ye tell me what ye were after? ”

“ What’s that to you? ”

“ Iverything. Ye knew I—I used to be courtin’ the girl.”

“ An’ if I did? ”

“ Ye knew I was pityin’ her—ye knew I was keen to do somethin’—ye knew, be the look o’ me, I was meanin’ to do somethin’! ”

“ *Knew* be danged, Hughy Fitch! I knew nothin’.”

“ Then why did ye go slinkin’ off without sayin’ a word? ”

“ What’s that to you, I say again? ”

“ Why didn’t ye play fair? ” Hughy persisted, his body bent towards Peter, head lowered, eyes glowing steadily.

Peter’s face flared crimson; as if stung by a whip lash his lean figure quivered.

“ Play fair? ” cried he, tense and shrill. “ What d’ ye mean?—ye whelp ye! Who didn’t play fair? Didn’t I ax ye if ye had cards—an’ ye hadn’t? Didn’t I toss ye out there on the lane—an’ didn’t I win? Hadn’t I made up me mind that if I won I’d ax her to marry me, an’ if I didn’t win I’d—I’d—? Who played ye false, Fitch? ” growled Peter, and pushed his face closer to Hughy’s. “ Who played ye false! ”

Hughy drew back, and silently stood looking at his partner.

“ Say the word again,” growled Peter. “ Who did ye say played ye false? ”

“ I take it back, Peter; I take back the word. I—I was hasty. I—I said too much.” Hughy paused; looked at his boots; slowly raised his eyes. “ All the same, Peter,

'twould ha' been a friend's act to ha' given me a hint—sure it would. Sure ye might ha' asked me, knowin' how I was thinkin', if I had—if I had a word to say."

Peter laughed sardonically; turned and lifted his spade.

"Ah, 'deed I might," he said. "Sure I might!"

"'Twould ha' done ye no harm," Hughy went on; then paused and looked at his spade. "But sure," he mused, "it's much the same after all. Sure—sure she refused ye."

"Hech!" grunted Peter.

"An' that bein' so," said Hughy, the glad light of inspiration flashing in his eyes; "that bein' so, sure things are much as they were, an' there's nothin' to hinder me. . . ." He stopped; looked at Lizzie; turned and gripped his spade. "Aw, just so," said he, with a smile and a nod. "Aw, just so!"

"Aw, 'deed ay," laughed Peter. "An' God help the man, say I, that has to face the world wi' the wits of a goose!"

III

HUGHY turned to his furrow and fell a-pondering. He must take stock of things, he said to himself; put this and that together, look before he leaped.

Think of Peter doing that—little, ugly, black Peter. Haw, haw! And think of Lizzie giving him the send-back. Haw, haw! Good for Lizzie; good for her. . . . He liked the girl; thought a power of her; would be more content with her than with anyone he ever knew; he

pitied her, too; from his heart wanted to do the crature a good turn, to take her from the trouble and give her of the best he had. . . . She would make a good wife, a strong, healthy, cheerful, willing wife; she would keep the loneliness from him, and keep the hearthstone bright and warm; she would—Ah, she'd do more for him than he deserved. . . . Suppose he asked her? Would she have him? Ah, to be sure! He wasn't Peter Jarmin, thanks be to God. He minded the time he was as near to asking her as his foot was to the spade. The word was ready; but, somehow, he never said it. He was afraid. He had thoughts, just then, of going to America; he was unsettled; her mother had abused him, his own had not been keen on the match; somehow, he had never said the word. Often he had thought about the matter since, often enough; but, somehow—och, somehow! . . . And now? Was he more settled now? Were things brighter? H'm! Still—och, still! Ah, things weren't so bad; and sure they might mend. He'd work hard; Lizzie would do her share; there was the bit o' land, the cow, the goats, the ducks and turkeys; there was a decent house and a stick or two of furniture—and sure, God was good, anyhow. Ay, ay. . . . Dear, dear, the strange way things turned out. Not a notion did he have, when he left home that morning, of giving Lizzie the word, not one. And now? Well, no matter. Maybe 'twas all for the best. . . . Suppose he went, then and there, and asked her? Maybe she was expecting him; maybe Peter—Hughy looked at Lizzie, at Peter, at the hills, at his boots; rubbed his chin; looked again at Lizzie; worked awhile, pondered awhile; started to go, came

back; started again, came back again; at last decided to keep his word until the glad hour of tea-time.

Tea-time came; and still Hughy wavered. Sure there was no hurry, he said. How could he give his word to the girl, and she drinking out of the same can with himself and Peter? How could he ask her, with Peter sitting there blinking and grinning like a mad monkey? Sure it was time enough. Sure there was no hurry. Sure he'd speak to her inside half an hour. Yes; danged but he would!

The half hour went; an hour went; the end of the second hour saw Hughy still pondering, and turning things over, and making up and unmaking his mind; the third brought dusk and quitting time, and to Hughy the determination—fixed and steady—to give Lizzie his word on the way home. That was it; that was the time! He'd have her at his elbow; Peter would have left them to themselves; it would be dark then and quiet and lonely; sure as gun was iron he'd speak the word before they passed Lackan lough! He hid his spade in a furrow; put on his coat and lit his pipe; then, elbow on the gate and hat rakishly cocked, stood waiting for Lizzie. He wondered if the word would come easily; wondered how Lizzie would take it; wondered, at last, how much longer she might be in taking off her *priskeen*. . . . What! Where was she going? Why was she making for Rhamus? Wasn't she coming home? In a flurry, Hughy put hands to mouth and shouted:

"*Hoi-i-i*, Lizzie. *Hoi-i-i*, Lizzie." The girl turned her head. "Aren't ye comin' home?"

"Naw." Lizzie walked on.

"Where—where are ye goin', then?"

"G' luck!"

Hughy stood dumbfounded. Peter came up, passed through the gateway, laughed in his sarcastic way and went up the lane toward Emo house.

"But, Lizzie—ah, Lizzie—I say, Lizzie—och, don't go!"

"Ah, Lizzie," mocked Peter in the lane; "och, Lizzie, don't go."

But already Lizzie was topping the ridges on her way towards Rhamus.

For a while, Hughy stood looking after her; then braced himself and went hurrying in her steps. Over the potato field he went, across the bottoms, along the heathery turf-banks of Emo bog. Somewhat vexed he felt, a little hurt, a little anxious that she might be bent on something reckless; it was with a sigh of relief—ruffled, maybe, with a breath of disappointment—that he saw her bend head and enter the smoke-wreathed portal of the Dalys'.

Hughy stopped; backed into the shelter of a hedge and stood pondering the position. Should he follow her? No. Anne had a tongue; James a knowing way with him. Should he make for home, and keep his word for the morning? No. He was tired keeping it; he would wait for the girl. In a ditch, therefore, with the whistling hedge at his back, and the dour sky above him, Hughy sat him down and fell to humouring dull time with an occasional thought, an odd stave of song, a

whiff now and then of precious tobacco. He felt hungry, tired, cold. At intervals, he heard the sound of Lizzie's laughter, of Anne's skirls, of James' hollow roar; presently came the clink of spoons and the rattle of tea cups. Ugh! He tightened his belt, buttoned his coat; moved further away from the sounds of revelry. . . . An hour passed and left Hughy desolate, sick with hunger and loneliness. The night hung around him, grey and grim. Was she never, never coming? He rose again, climbed Rhamus hill, scrambled across the old castle wall; with eyes fixed steadily on the path up which Lizzie must come, sat patiently waiting. . . . Ah, she was powerful slow in coming. Ah, he was famished, chilled to the bone. Was she—Whist! There she was. Noiselessly Hughy slunk from the ruins, crouched across the fields, struck the Bunn road at Stonegate; there stood waiting in the black shade of a hedge.

Before long the sound of Lizzie's step came to Hughy; and at that he stepped upon the road and turned to meet her. Hands deep in his pockets, shoulders loosely swaggering, and voice humouring the night with a tuneless stave from *Norah Creina*, aimlessly—so he affected it—he went sauntering along. Presently he met Lizzie; passed her with a gruff Good-night: then, wheeled about, caught her up and peered round into her face.

"Why," said he, and slapped his leg; "dang me, if it isn't herself! Well, well." Without a word, Lizzie walked on. "Now, who'd ha' thought it," Hughy continued, shortening his stride; "who'd ha' thought this was goin' to happen to me? Here was I, daunderin'

along the road an' singin' to meself, just settlin' me supper an' thinkin' o' nothin' much; when someone passes. 'Good-night,' says I, like that, an' walks on; then stops as if somethin' hit me; hurries back an' there—there was Lizzie herself! Well, well. Now, now." Lizzie kept silent; bravely she stepped along, lonely on her own side of the road. "An'—an' how is it," asked Hughy, in a while, "that you'd be these parts at this time o' night? Sure I thought ye were at home hours ago."

"Did ye?" came across the road.

"Ah, to be sure; to be sure. Why, woman alive, it's gone supper time; it's nine o'clock if it's a minute."

"I know. How long'd it be, Hughy Fitch, since yourself said Good-bye to the supper-pot?"

"Aw, a good while, Lizzie; now it'd be a good while."

"A matter of a day an' a night, mebbe?"

"Och, not at all. Woman alive, a day an' a night!"

"We were thinkin' in Fat Anne's," said Lizzie quietly, "that mebbe you'd be comin' in; but sure, I suppose, ye found your own company enough yonder on the ditch."

"Aw!" Hughy missed a step. "An' did ye see me? Did ye, now? Sure—sure. . . . Och, Lizzie, I was sore to see ye goin' off like that. Sure I thought it strange."

"Ay?"

"I—I had a word to say to ye." Hughy sidled across the road. "I—I wanted to—to—" Hughy sidled back again. "What was this Peter Jarmin was sayin'?"

to ye?" he asked in a while. "He seemed ojus put out about somethin'; ay, he did."

"Is that so?"

"Ay. He looked as black as a thunderstorm. He swore powerful. He called ye—och, all the names in the world."

"An' ye listened to him!"

"Listen! An' what else could I do? Wasn't I joyed to see him like that, an' to hear him." Hughy turned on the road. "Be the Lord, I nearly took him be the throat when he said what he'd been at. The little black crow! To think of him darin' to ax ye what he did!" Hughy walked on a yard or two; then went slanting across the road. "But sure—sure it's all the same now. Sure it's just the same as if he'd niver said a word to ye, Lizzie."

"Is that so?"

"Ay. It's just the same. Be the powers, but ye served him right; but ye paid him out in fine style!" Hughy laughed, slapped his knee; edged still closer to Lizzie. "What, in glory, Lizzie, did ye say to him?"

"How d'ye know I said anythin', Hughy Fitch?"

"Know? Sure I seen ye. Sure I heard ye laughin'. Sure I heard ye talkin'. What—what, the divil, Lizzie, was it ye said?"

"Nothin', Hughy Fitch, I haven't said before, meb; an' nothin' I wouldn't say again—if I wanted to."

"Ay! Aw, just so. Nothin' ye haven't said before, nothin' ye wouldn't say again. Aw, just so." Hughy took to his own side of the way; hung his head and

went slouching along, hands in pockets and eyes on the dust. "Aw, just so," he muttered. "Ay, indeed."

The two passed Lackan lough; went up Lackan brae; and on between the Gorteen hedges, poplars, clustered apple trees. Not a word fell from either. Not a soul did they meet; not a light blinked in a cottage; not a sound but the bitter whistling of the wind and the tramp of their own feet, came to them. The night was dark; gloomy and low, the sky went rushing past; naked and forlorn, the wind-swept fields stretched away right and left of the weary road. Lizzie shivered; sighed softly, glanced towards Hughy. "Och," said she as if to herself. "Aw, dear!" Hughy turned his head and went sidling towards Lizzie: Lizzie dropped her eyes and went sidling towards Hughy. They touched elbows about the middle of the road.

"You're lonesome, Lizzie?"

"Ah, no—no. Sure it's nothin'."

"But ye are. I know it. Haven't I seen ye all the day long. Didn't I hear ye sighin' not a minute ago. I say, Lizzie: What is it?"

"It's nothin'," answered Lizzie, almost in a sob. "Aw, it's nothin'."

"But it is somethin'. I know it is. Niver before did I see ye in such a humour. God knows, twenty times this day I had it in me mind to pitch that ould grape in a boghole an' send ye home. An' I would—only—only Peter was there—only ye were so curious in your ways—only——"

Hughy's fountain of speech dried suddenly. His throat was parched; his heart thumping. He bowed his

head; rubbed his chin; walked on by Lizzie's elbow in solemn pondering. How say the word? he asked himself over and over; how make a start? Once more Lizzie sighed and murmured. Hughy glanced at her.

"Lizzie. I say, Lizzie."

"Well, Hughy."

"Would ye—were ye in earnest, the day, when ye wished ye could get off to Ameriky? Were ye, now?"

"In earnest? Ah, God knows I was!"

"An' why were ye? Woman dear, what put such a thing in your head? Didn't ye know—don't ye know——?"

The word would not come; and below his breath Hughy cursed his impotent tongue. The fool he was! What ailed him? Why did he feel so strange, so helpless? Why did the word hang trembling on his lips, trembling and refusing to take wing?

"Ah," cried he presently; "ah, don't ye know, Lizzie? Don't ye know?"

"What, Hughy?"

"Why that—that——" Hughy stopped. "Ah, curse me for a fool, that can't get a word out o' me! I'm—I'm worse nor a fool. I'm— See here, Lizzie; have pity on one. Can't ye say a word to help me?"

Lizzie looked slyly up at this big, slow Hughy; and her eyes were gleaming.

"Say a word, Hughy? Arrah, what could I say?"

"Tell me you'll—Och, ye know what I mean."

"Is it anything about—about Peter, Hughy?"

"Dang Peter!"

"Is it anything about yourself, then, Hughy?"

“ Ay, it is—about meself an’ you, Lizzie.”

“ An’ something about the ould mother at home?”
Lizzie went on, her eyes slyly twinkling beneath the peak of her cap.

“ Yis, yis! That’s it.”

“ An’ a word about the ould days when ye used to——?”

“ Yis, yis! ”

“ When ye used to sit wi’ your toes in the ashes, an’ throw sheep’s eyes at me, an’ glower at the ould mother—God help her!—an’——?”

“ Yis, yis! That’s it, Lizzie.”

“ An’ ye used to—to— Ah, how can I say it?”

“ Ah, do, Lizzie. For God’s sake do, woman!”

“ Ye used to—sit wi’ your arm round me—an’—an’ kiss me at the dure?”

Like a man Hughy turned on the road and took Lizzie to his heart.

“ Ah, yis, Lizzie; ah, yis. Aw, woman dear; woman dear! At last; at last. . . . Och, but I’m glad. Aw, woman dear! An’ you’ll have me, Lizzie; you’ll have me? Say it, woman; say it!”

Lizzie raised her eyes.

“ Sure it looks like it, Hughy.”

“ An’ you’ll say no more about Ameriky? An’ you’ll have no more o’ your lonesomeness? An’ you’ll be just the same as ye used to be in the ould days?”

“ Wi’ the help o’ God,” answered Lizzie.

“ An’ you’ll play no more o’ your pranks on me? You’ll not be leadin’ me the sorrows’ own dance, till it’s not a know I know if I’m on me head or me heels?”

“Naw,” said Lizzie, and laughed softly on Hughy’s shoulder. “Naw. I’ll keep all that now—for Peter.”

Then Hughy took her face in his hands and looked down into it.

“Look here, me girl,” said he, his voice solemn as the night’s; “no more o’ that. Let Peter’s name alone. As a partner he’s well enough, but as a friend I’m mistrustful of him. Ye hear me?”

“I—I do.” Again Lizzie laughed softly; then, suddenly and passionately, flung her arms round Hughy’s neck and raised her face to his. “Hughy,” cried she. “Aw, Hughy, man! Ah, the weary day it’s been, the weary day; an’ now—an’ now! . . . Aw, Hughy, man! . . .”

And the hedges sang, and the trees moaned soothingly; and old earth spun merrily beneath the feet of these two, the man and the maid, standing there under the rushing sky in their eternal youth with their eternal story.



THE TURF-CUTTERS



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I

IT was the first real day of spring; a living, heart-some day. The great sun looked joyously down on a wakening earth; the air had a freshness as of the sea; from every hedgerow the birds piped out; the hills were alive, the valleys jubilant; far away, my Lord the mountain stretched himself lazily in the sunshine; everywhere beneath the sky ran a riot of life, the earth thrilled with it, the wind came throbbing with its fervour.

In the valley which lies between Emo and Rhamus hill, the turf-cutters were out; and now, the clang of the one-o'clock bell in Louth farmyard having died away among the hills, sat squatted round their fires among the heather. All the morning, from a score of mounds, the blue smoke had streamed up, had run its tattered skirts together above the hill-tops, swept before stress of the wind out over Thrasna river and gone trailing for the shining roofs of Bunn. All the morning, it had filled the valley and lain stretched like a blue veil upon the distant hills; wherever you went, all the morning, the pungent smell of it—bringing to you memories of mud walls, soot-blackened rafters and clacking groups round cottage hearthstones—had come to you, now thin and faint, like the whiff from a peasant's coat as he slouches up the aisle o' Sundays, now wholesome and refreshing as the breath of whins, now hot and reek-

ing as from the mouths of wattled chimneys. All the morning, in all your wanderings, the wind had brought to you the sound of laughter, the shouts of men, the songs of women, the skirls of children; now and then as the smoke lifted, you had glimpse of the crowd of workers, saw the flash of spades and the glint of shawls and handkerchiefs, the quick popping of peat from black bog-holes, the going and coming across the banks of shrieking barrows: so, all the morning, it had been; now, silence held the valley, the smoke went up thin and clear, and scattered among the willow clumps, you had sight of the turf-cutters gathered in groups round the twinkling fires.

At top of the bog, not far from the Curleck road, burned the fire of the Dalys; and round it, sitting squat on the peat bank, was a party of ten: three men, three women and four children—a family group gathered from neighbouring bog-holes to make merry over the potatoes and salt.

As lord of the fire and tenant, moreover, of an elegant mudhouse (the same, in fact, that, in the old days, had sheltered Pete Coyne), James Daly held chief seat at the feast, well shielded from the wind by a stunted willow, his back to a stump and legs crossed luxuriously. Beside him, on the one hand, his brother-in-law Mike Brady, a thin sour-looking man, sat propped against a creel; on the other, his old father sat bent forward like ripened corn, eyes fixed wearily on the fire and his chin wagging. Facing these, cook and hostess in one, squatted the buxom Mrs. Daly—known thereabouts as Fat Anne—having on this side her sister-in-law Mrs.

Judy Brady, a woefully thin and yellow little woman, and on that her cousin Lizzie Dolan, young, fresh, bouncing, the belle of the bog.

These six almost ringed the fire; but behind the broad back of Mrs. Daly, a lesser ring of four shockheaded children kept themselves in a fine state of excitement by jouncing under the elbows of their elders for a chance glimpse at the fire, by scrambling for the potatoes that occasionally came flying over their mother's shoulder, peeling them with their fingers (in slavish imitation, be it said, of the ways of their elders) and throwing the skins to the dog. All were bare-legged and bare-footed, and what garments they had were coarse and ragged; the men were mud-spattered from head to foot, the women peat-stained to the ankles and elbows, the children gaping boldly through their tatters; the grip of winter was still fast in their bones, its hardships deep on their faces; not a man there had sixpence in his pocket or a pound in the world, you might have weighed—and valued—the bulk of them against half a ton of hay: truly an uncouth party enough, and a motley, striving there, on the fat earth, beneath the glad sky, to appease stern hunger with offerings of potatoes and salt and libations of buttermilk.

“Well, glory be to God,” said Lizzie Dolan, as she cooled a potato by throwing it deftly from hand to hand; “glory be to God, but it's grand to feel that warm sun on the small o' your back!”

“Yis,” said Anne Daly, and turning over on her knees began drawing a fresh cast of roasted potatoes from the fire with a pair of wooden tongs. “Yis; an’

when, forby that, the fire's scorchin' the face on ye it's like as if ye were stretched between two mustard plasters. There ye are, childer," cried she, dropping the potatoes one by one over her shoulder; "an' God send they may fatten ye." The children skirled and scrambled; the dog yelped and jumped. "Stop your throats over there, dang ye," shouted Mike Brady. "An' stop yours," retorted Anne Daly, offering Mike a potato. The milk noggin went round. From hand to hand passed the saucer of pepper and salt. And now, for a while, about the Dalys' fire, the wolves ceased snarling.

Lizzie Dolan wiped her lips on her bare arm and sighed contentedly. "Och, but it's the heavenly day, anyway," said she, with a look at the sky. "Look how far away the sky has gone—an' it as blue as blue. Aw, me! An' to think that only yisterday, or the day before, we were shiverin' in our stockin's . . . an' now—an' now we're as warm as warm. Aw, sure, it's powerful to be alive!"

Mike Brady leant towards Lizzie.

"Ay, it's well to be alive. It'd take more'n the sun to warm ye if ye were below," said Mike, pointing downwards with a finger. "Sun or moon," he went on grimly, when he had blown his potato cool, "is all one when the worms are in your bones."

"Ugh, listen to the man!" Lizzie shivered a little. "Lord sees, it's ducked in a bog-hole ye should be, Mike Brady. Such talk on such a day!"

"An' what ails the talk? An' what ails the day, will ye tell me?" Mike fixed his black little eyes on Lizzie's

face. "Just because you feel like a filly on grass, is that any reason why I should? Eh?"

Anne Daly sat back on her heels, leant on the tongs and bent towards Mike.

"Listen to me, Mike Brady," said she. "It'd be manners in ye to keep your foolishness till you've filled your stomach. Man alive, what ails ye? Or did ye sleep on nettles last night? You an' your bones an' worms—Ach!"

"She's right there," said James Daly, with a wag of his head. "Keep such talk till you're like the ould man here. Time enough to talk o' graves, Mike, when your head's white."

"Ay, ay," groaned old Daly. "Och, ay!"

"An' isn't it just that," snapped Mike; "isn't it just because I'm travellin' fast to white hairs meself that I say such things?"

"White hairs your granny!" sneered Anne Daly. "An' you with ivery tooth in your head. Arrah, whisht wi' your bleather, Mike Brady!"

"Arrah, whisht wi' yours," retorted Mike. "D'ye think ye can tell me about meself? A lot o' good the sun or the spring does any man when the blood's cowl'd in him. Look at Lizzie, bloomin' over there like a meadow daisy, an' as full o' life as a kitten. D'ye think I'm iver goin' to feel like that again?"

"Ach, whisht, Mike," said Lizzie and dropped her face.

"It's God's truth," moaned James Daly; "it's God's truth. I mind when the sight o' the spring sun'd make me jump like a salmon, an' go struttin' along in me

glory like a full-feathered peacock. Ay, I do. But it doesn't now. Na, na. It doesn't now. Ay, but it's well to be young. Yis."

"It is so," groaned old Daly. "It is so."

"Aw, ay," sighed little yellow Judy Brady. "It is so."

Dole seemed come upon the party; almost might you have expected to see them turn from the feast and sob among the heather. Of the six making the inner ring—already had the children and the dog gone scampering across the bog in quest of diversion—only Anne Daly kept from groaning.

"Well, divil take me," cried she, "but it's the lively party we're gettin'. Faith, if we only had a hearse it's a dacent funeral we'd make between us. Here, dang your eyes," she shouted, scattering fresh potatoes over the turf bank, "stop your croakin' wi' them!"

James her husband drew out his pipe and with a little finger began probing the bowl in search of tobacco.

"Me belt's tight," said he; "but I'll croak no more."

"Thank God for that same," replied Anne.

"For all that," continued James with an eye on Lizzie, "I'm free to remark, I suppose, that it's well to be young."

Lizzie raised her head.

"An' who's denyin' it?" said she, not very softly.

"Divil a soul," answered James, reaching for a coal.

"To hear you, an' more than you, you'd think ye were all grudgin' me me youth."

"Faith, an' so I am." Gravely James made answer, gravely through his pipe smoke winked at Judy Brady.

"So I am," said James, "for I wish to glory, Lizzie, I was young meself an' had ye this mortal minit i' the inside o' me arm."

Lizzie tittered and flushed; Judy Brady put a hand on her wizened lips; Mike sniffed twice, which was as near laughter as he usually got; Anne Daly looked across the fire at her husband.

"I'm thankful to ye, Mister Daly," said she, with a toss of her head.

"Arrah, not at all, Mrs. Daly," answered James, and waved his pipe stem; "not at all. Woman dear, ould married people like ourselves are used to these wee things. Sure, ye needn't thank me. Sure, one o' these fine days, some tight fella—we all know *who*—'ll be sayin' as much to Lizzie herself over the coals."

Again James winked at Judy Brady. Lizzie reddened and bridled. "Will he, indeed?" snapped she.

"Aw, 'deed he will, me girl; 'deed he will."

"An' supposin' he doesn't, Mister Daly?"

"The Lord send, child; the Lord send."

"Then suppose he *does*, Mister Daly? What'll happen then?"

"Aw, the Lord knows, child; the Lord knows."

"Ye think," said Lizzie, bending towards her tormentor; "ye think I'll sit here like Anne an' listen to him?"

"I'm thinkin' so," drawled James. "Supposin' you're wise, I'm thinkin' so."

"An' supposin' I'm not wise?"

"Then there'll be the divil to pay, I'm fearin'."

Then Lizzie stretched an arm towards James, and

fixed him with glittering eyes, and cried: "That's what ye think o' marryin'—that's what ye think, James Daly!"

"That's it," answered James, and looked at his wife; "that's me experience. . . . But niver fear, *acushla*; take things aisy. Marryin's like all else; ye get used to it in the course o' time. Ye do so."

"Ye think that!" Again Lizzie writhed and panted and cried. "An' ye think I—I——"

"I know all about it," answered James in his driest voice; "iverything I know about it. At first, when the hard word comes, you'll bite your lips; then, after a year or so, when you're seasoned a bit, you'll flare out angry an' mebbe go for the tongs; after that, if you're wise, you'll just notice nothin'. Ah, no. Like an ass's skin you'll get dull o' feelin'; sticks'll only rattle on ye; nothin' but prods of a pin'll make ye jump. Ah, no. That's the way o' the world, sirs. We're all the same. At first, when Mary goes to the milkin' out Pat must go to carry the candle; after a while, Mary goes be herself, an' Pat sits smokin' up the chimbley; another year or two goes, an' if the cow kicks Mary into the gripe Pat says it's a damned good job; after that, it's just waitin' for the end, an' when that comes it's good-bye to the graveyard for Pat or Mary—an' a good rid-dance too. . . . Ay, that's how the world goes, sirs; that's the way."

James settled back against his stump, folded his arms, and with the knowing smile of your professional humourist broad on his face, sat waiting for sport. Already, old Daly was nodding over his pipe; with gleam-

ing eyes, the rest of the ring bent forward to have good sight of Lizzie's face.

"That's what ye say," cried she, and stretched out a quivering arm; "that's what ye tell me to expect? That's the experience has come to you, James Daly, after all these years? An' ye sit there tellin' it to me! But let me tell ye this, James Daly—an' to your face I say it: If I thought your words were true, I'd scorn ye; an' for meself, I'd pray the Lord to keep me always a child, an' I'd sooner die this day, nor"

At loss of a word, perhaps at loss of a thought—for she was speaking in a flurry of excitement—Lizzie paused; and just then the young scarecrows of Dalys began clamouring in the heather.

"Here's ould Rawbin," cried they. "Look, mammy, at ould Rawbin an' the ass."

"Go on," said James Daly to Lizzie. "You'd sooner die nor what?"

"Here's ould Rawbin," shouted the scarecrows. "Look, mammy—look!"

"Ah, be quiet, ye brats ye!" shouted Anne.

"Aw, but here's ould Rawbin," persisted the scarecrows: and with that Lizzie sat back and dropped her arm.

II

Along the narrow cart-pass which from Curleck road runs over Emo bog, an old man came slowly and before him drove an ass and creels. His face was withered, rough, stubbled with iron-grey hair. A battered beaver

hat hung precariously on his crown, and about his neck was a woollen muffler wrapped round and round, the ends hanging outside his half-open waistcoat. A long frieze coat, adorned with patches everywhere, with brass buttons here and there, and pieces of cord in place of buttons elsewhere, hung from his bent old shoulders to his feeble old knees; his legs were tightly bound in coils of straw rope, and with each step his heavy unlaced boots slipped up and down his heels. Steadily he plodded along, eyes fixed straight before him, tongue incessantly clicking, his oaken staff resting upon the crupper of the creel-mats.

Now Robin, as he was called, was something of a character and a good deal of a favourite; and as he passed the Dalys' fire, Anne, nothing loth maybe, in the manner of hostesses, to change the talk among her party, or to bring diversion to it, rose and hailed him.

"*Hoi-i-i*, Robin," she called. "How the mischief are ye?"

"I'm rightly," answered Robin and plodded on.

"Is it pass us ye would without a crack?" cried Anne. "Och, man alive, what's the hurry?"

"I want scraws for the fire," came back; "I haven't a spark."

"Ah, sorrow take the fire. Come over here an' share ours, an' ate a roasted pratie; come on, now."

Robin stopped short, scratched his pate, mumbled a word or two to himself; then left the ass to its devices, crossed the ditch which keeps the bog from the cart track, and went stumbling through the heather towards the Dalys' fire.

All welcomed him. James shared with him the luxury of his stump and willow; Anne piled the potatoes before him, set the milk noggin at his elbow, promised him a bite o' bread an' a dribble o' tay later on, and told him to fire away. Without any ado Robin shot a potato from its skin, dipped it in the salt and began eating. He gave no time to talk; seldom lifted eyes from hands; within ten minutes of the time of his coming there was not a potato outside his coat.

He put down the milk noggin; gave a sigh of content; wiped lips on sleeve, settled back against the stump and began groping for his pipe. Already James Daly, an elbow resting on the stump and cheek in hand, was fast asleep; Mike Brady, flat on his face and forehead resting on his crossed wrists, was lying like a log; old Daly, still sitting by the fire, had gathered up his legs, laid arms across his knees, bent head upon them, and so gone fast asleep: from the three went up a great noise of snoring.

"Well, I'm obliged to ye for that, Anne," said Robin, bringing forth his pipe. "Lord love ye for it. Sure it's powerful to feel full again. Ay, ay."

"Aw, not at all, Robin; not at all, man," answered Anne, and set an old black porringer upon the fire; "it's a poor heart, sure, wouldn't share a bite wi' a neighbour." She held out a coal in the tongs. "Here ye are, me son. Light up an' have a draw before the tay's ready."

"I'm obliged to ye, Anne; I'm obliged to ye. Lord love ye, Anne," said Robin; then lit his pipe and began smoking. Gradually his eyelids grew heavy; the pipe

went out and fell from his lips; his head sank, rose, sank again, suddenly fell back against the stump—and Robin was with the snorers.

Anne Daly took the porringer from the fire; poured some tea into a mug, added a little sugar and handed the mug to Mrs. Brady.

“Drink, Judy,” said she.

“God bless ye, Anne,” said Judy; and drank.

“Did iver God make quarer cratures nor the men, I wonder,” Anne went on, and passed the mug to Lizzie. “To think o’ the four sleepin’ there like brute beasts an’ good tay goin’ beggin’! Lord sees, it’s wonderful.”

“Ay, it’s wonderful,” said Judy Brady. “Ah, sure, they’re the powerful strange mortals, anyway.”

“Strange?” said Anne. “It’s not the word. They’re onknowable.”

“There’s Mike’d sleep fifteen hours on end, without iver budgin’ a limb,” said Judy. “Dear knows, but only for the hunger, sometimes I think he’d niver wake.”

“Well, he’ll get little chance then o’ sleepin’ for iver in this world,” was Anne’s comment. “For the likes of us can’t get far from the hunger. Ah, no.”

“Ah, no.” Judy took another sip of tea. “Ah, no, indeed!”

“Men are the divils,” cried Lizzie, all suddenly. “To think o’ the way *that* James talked! . . . It’s not true, I tell ye . . . I tell ye I’ll niver get married if . . .”

Anne and Judy opened eyes of wonder. “Lord sees,”

said they; "Lord sees!" Then said Anne, in the voice of the scorner:

"Ah, quit your foolery, Lizzie Dolan. Troth it's in short clothes ye should be still. You an' your tantrums, an' your threats, an' your bleather about niver marryin'! Niver marry, indeed! Troth, will ye; an' that before harvest next. Here, take another drig o' the tay an' stop your romancin'. . . . Mopin', indeed! An' James only jokin' ye. Mopin', indeed! An' you as good, a'most, as marrit already, wi' a snug house an' a bouncin' boy waitin' for ye; an' you not promised to him more'n a fortnight! Come, sit over here, an' tell us about that new dress ye'll be after gettin'; an' quit your pighin', for God's sake! Come on, I tell ye."

And Lizzie came; within five minutes was herself again, bright-eyed, voluble, as full of spirits and life as that spring day was full of glory.

The talk was of butter, eggs, dresses—dresses, forsooth, and all three with only tatters in their wardrobes—of their little affairs, pleasures, troubles, of men and marriage, and of Lizzie's coming marriage in particular; presently it flagged somewhat, and a pause coming, Lizzie's eyes fell upon the sleeping figure of ould Robin. He looked woeful; and at sight of him—at sight of his time-beaten face, his ugliness and squalor, his open mouth and dribbling chin—the girl shivered in the sunshine. "Lord, the ugly ould man, he is," said she; "the ugly ould sinner"; then, a spirit of mischief and of the spring being strong in her, reached over and softly took the old beaver from Robin's head.

"Whisht," said she, as Anne Daly remonstrated;

“whisht, till I show ye”; and plucking some sprays of heather she began decorating the hat. Long pieces she fixed all round within the band, and hanging down behind, and sticking forth the holes on top; here and there on the rim she laid a potato skin, and up the front fastened the old man’s pipe; then, all being to her fancy, gently replaced the hat on Robin’s head and drew back tittering.

“Lord, the sight he is, the comical ould sight!” cried she. “Whisht, Anne, whisht; don’t laugh or you’ll wake him.” But already Anne had laughed, and Robin was awake.

He sat forward, blinking and rubbing his eyes.

“Faith,” said he, in a drowsy croak, “I—I misdoubt I was asleep—so I was.”

The women were so near laughter that none dared venture an answer.

“Faith,” said Robin again, “I must ha’ been asleep, so I must.” He yawned wearily and stretched himself; then made as if to rise. “I’ll have to be stirrin’, so I will,” said he. “I wonder where that divil of an ass is now? Mebbe it’s kickin’ in a bog-hole the crature is.”

Lizzie choked down her laughter.

“Ah, no, Robin,” said she. “Now don’t be stirrin’ yet. Sure you’ve time enough; an’ sure there’s the ass grazin’ along the pass; an’ ye haven’t had your tay; an’—an’ sure you’ll wait anyway till the men wake up. Sure they’d be ojus glad to see ye again,” said Lizzie, and at Anne Daly winked most knowingly.

The old man sank back against the stump.

“Very well,” said he; “very well. Sure there’s

no hurry, so there's not. It's a long day till night yit; an' there's no one waitin' yonder for me now. Ah, no!"

Up and down the old man wagged his head; and at sight of the dancing heather plumes in his hat Lizzie buried face in hands and turned away.

"Aw, Anne dear," laughed she; "Anne dear, I'll die, I'll die!"

Robin gathered up his knees, clasped them with his hands and sat looking towards Thrasna river. "Ah, no," he moaned, "there's no one waitin' for me now."

Then Lizzie turned to him.

"Tell me, Robin," said she; "about what age might ye be?"

"If God spares me, I'll be seventy-five come next Hollentide, so I will. Yis, seventy-five years."

"It's a big age," said Anne Daly; "a powerful big age."

"Arrah, not at all," said Lizzie; "sure it's only a trifle, an' it lyin' like a feather on him." She cocked her head. "I say, Robin, isn't it near time ye thought o' marryin' again?"

The old man turned slowly and looked full at Lizzie.

"What's that?" said he.

"Aw now, ye heard me well enough." Lizzie's look and tone were coy. "That's only your little way, Robin. Come, now. Out wi' it. Who's the lassie?"

"Is it o' marryin' you're axin' me?" asked Robin; and before the solemnity of his face Lizzie dropped her eyes.

"It is," said she.

Slowly Robin turned away and looked out over the heather.

"I was married only once," said he, very deliberately; "only once; an' I wish to God I was married yit, for it's meself is the lonesome man this day."

The women looked soberly at each other. Across the fire old Daly awoke and sat staring in wonderment at Robin's hat. Mike Brady turned over on his back and began to yawn.

"I dunno if ye know it," said Robin, turning again to Lizzie; "but yisterday twelvemonth to a day it was that I buried Mary."

Lizzie flushed crimson and cast down her eyes. "Ah, now," was all she could say.

"Yisterday twelvemonth to a day," Robin went on. "An' would ye believe me, it's just the same wi' me the day as it was twelve months ago—just as lonesome an' bewildered."

Mike Brady sat upright and in sleepy amaze watched Robin rise slowly to his feet.

"It's a mortal curious kind o' feelin' comes over a man," said Robin, still very deliberately, and looking straight before him, and speaking as if to himself, "when he loses somethin' that he's got used to. If it's only an ould baccy knife he kind o' frets over losin' it; an' the longer he had it the more he misses it; an' when it's somethin' livin' that goes—an' ould dog mebbe, or an ass, or somethin'—aw, sure, the feelin's woeful. It's lek as if the world was different, somehow, an' oneself, an'—an' iverything. Aw, yis, it's a mortal curious

kind o' feelin'. An', if so be it's God's will that a man loses a child, or a sister, or—or——"

Robin paused, and looking down at his boots, began rubbing his chin with his fingers. One or two of the potato skins and a spray of heather fell from his hat, but he never saw them fall. Like logs the three women and the two men sat watching him. James Daly still slept. Out in the heather the children were shouting. From the fires here and there among the willow clumps, came sounds of song and laughter.

"Nigh fifty years," Robin went on and raised his face, "I lived wi' Mary—nigh fifty years; an' all that time, 'cept one day an' night I spent in Glann witnessin' to a lawsuit, I was niver parted from her. Fifty years—sure it must be we got well used to other. Aw ay, it must be. Sure it stands to sense that when two people ate for fifty years at the same table, an' work together, an' sleep together, an' do iverything together, that—that one's not oneself at all but just as much one as t'other. Sure it must be. . . . Aw, I know it; well I know it!"

Again Robin paused. James Daly awoke; yawned; slowly raised his eyes; all at once caught sight of Robin's heather-decked hat. "Why—why," he began; "what in glory, Robin——"

"Ah, whisht, ye *bodach*, ye," snapped Anne his wife; "whisht wi' ye."

Robin fixed his eyes on Rhamus hill, and went on.

"Ay, but it's wonderful the grip a woman has on a man when he's lived wi' her for fifty years. It's astonishin'. An' ye niver know how astonishin' it is till ye

lose her. Naw, ye niver know till then. Losin' anythin' else in the world's nothin' to it; nothin' at all. Ye get used to that in a week, or a month or so; but niver, niver do ye get used to th' other. Niver, niver! Ah, well, I know it. . . . Twelve months ago an' a day more, I buried Mary. That's a longish time, you'd think, long enough anyway to get used to missin' her. But, somehow, I can't get used to it. How is it, will ye tell me? How does it come that ivery night I start from me sleep an' stretch out me hand to feel if she's there—an' she isn't there—an' ivery night I lie awake from that on till mornin', just lyin' frettin' an' frettin', an' thinkin' an' thinkin'? An' how is it, will ye tell me, that when I'm lightin' the fire o' mornin's, or lacin' me boots, or eatin' me breakfast, or doin' anythin' at all, I keep turnin' me head as I used to do when she spoke, or I heard her foot? An' what is it sends me wanderin' about the house as if I was lookin' for somethin'—lookin' for somethin', I dunno what? An' then I ramble about the fields, an' do this an' that, an' see this an' that, an' all the time me mind is wanderin' an' I go moonin' an' stumblin' about just as if I was lookin' for a thing I'd dropped. What makes me carry on like that now? An' then I come back; an' when I lift the latch somehow there's a kind o' dread on me, for I know the house is empty as the grave, an' I know I'll keep hearin' things, an' imaginin' things, an' doin' quare things. . . . Aw, it's mighty curious, ojus strange. An' through it all I know I'm foolish—sure I know it. I know she's dead, an' buried; an' I know I'll niver see her in this world again; an' I keep tryin' to get used to it, an' tryin' to

make the best o' things, seein' 'twas God's will an' can't be helped—but it's no use, no use. I can't forget things; I can't get used to the loneliness; an', for all I know, if I was to live to be a hundred it'd be just the same, an' I'd be as lonely then as I am this mortal day. I'd go home then, just as I'll go home the day, knowin' that there's an empty house waitin' for me, an' a dark hearth; an' I'd go moonin' about, an' in an' out, an' up an' down, just as if I was hopin' to see someone or tryin' to find somethin'. An' the foolishness of it, sirs—the foolishness of it! Fer, sure, there's nothin' to be found, nothin' in the world; an' there, starin' me in the face iver an' always, is Mary's ould chair, an' there's her boots, an' her shawl, an' her specs—an' the chair's empty, an' the boots, an' iverything. Ay, iverything's empty—house an' all, house an' all . . . an' it's meself only feels like a ghost in it."

Robin stopped and stood rubbing his chin; then turned to Lizzie. "So you'll see," he said, with a flickering smile, "you'll see that mebbe, when all's considered, I've had enough o' marryin' to do my time."

"Ah, God help ye," moaned Anne Daly; "God help your ould heart!"

But Lizzie, her face all wet with tears, ran to Robin.

"Wait, Robin," said she, and deftly began plucking away the sprigs of heather from his hat; "wait, me son, till I fix the band on that ould hat o' yours—sure it's all crooked, an' up an' down. . . . There, now it's better; an' may God forgive me this day!"

"Forgive ye for what, child?" asked Robin.

"Aw, for me sins," cried Lizzie; "an' may He smile

on yourself all your days. . . . But aisy, now, till I fix ye up a bit. Aisy now," said she and knotted the old man's scarf; then buttoned his waistcoat; then stooped and laced up his boots; last of all took him by the hand. "An' now come away wi' me," said she, "till I help ye catch the ass, an' get the scraws for the fire. Come away."

"I will," said Robin. "Good-bye, Anne, ye girl, ye—an' James—an' all. God keep yer, childer."

"Good-bye to ye, Robin," answered Anne Daly, and spoke for the rest. "Good-bye, me son, an' may the angels keep ye and comfort ye."

So, hand in hand, Robin and Lizzie started; and just as they set foot on the heather, Lizzie turned head and flashed a look at James Daly where he sat staring into the fire.

"An' now, James Daly," cried she; "*now* what have ye got to say for yourself?"



THE MOWERS

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F



I

PETER JARMIN stepped out upon the street and pulled tight the door behind him, yawned heavily and stretched wearily, blinked at the sky and looked out across the misty hills towards the mountains; then stumbled listlessly through a bedraggled scattering of hungry fowls, entered the byre and came forth with a scythe, shouldered it and went round the cabin up along the hill.

It was yet early morning—six o'clock or thereabouts—and, though the sun was high, upon hill and hollow still lay heavy the grey wonder of the dew. Like spring frost it lay, or air grown visible, sparkling and flashing on the pastures. Through it Peter's feet went trailing, leaving a long track along the hillside. It washed his boots to the ankles and soaked the ragged bottoms of his trousers; the rushes were bowed under it, the whins set as with diamonds; but Peter, burdened with his scythe, trudged on not heeding and hardly seeing. His shoulders drooped, his eyes stared fixedly at the grass before him. He looked hungry, weary, half-asleep. No more than alive he was, that morning in July, as slowly he went dragging through the dew across the silent fields.

He came to a lane, struck the broad road; in a while turned up a *boreen* and stopped at the door of a cottage that stood among poplars and boor-trees back on the

first rise of a hill. There were fowls on the street and goats and a dog, but the door was closed and the chimney smokeless; and at that Peter sniffed disdainfully, swore viciously and vividly, then hammered on the panels with clenched fist. "Hughy," he shouted; "d'ye hear me, Hughy? Dang ye for a *bosthoon*, come out to your work!"

The dead must have turned at such clatter; and in a minute there came from the cottage a sudden stir of life, then a clash of voices, then a great shout: "All right, Peter. Half a minit, Peter. I'm comin'; I'm comin'."

"Ay. You're comin'," snarled Peter; "you're comin'! An' high time, troth." He backed away from the—door, turned to face the roadway and stood looking sourly out through the rising mists. He seemed mighty ill-humoured, that fine morning, did Peter; there was viciousness in his very eyes.

At his back, and behind the door, that stir of life continued. Stools clattered, voices rose, boots clumped here and there: then, "Well, good-bye to ye, Lizzie," came the voice, and quick upon it, the opening of the door and the coming of Hughy.

A very giant looked Hughy, he stepping forth that narrow doorway, his eyes blinking at the light, his waistcoat unbuttoned, his cap perched askew on his tousled hair. Yawning noisily he stretched every muscle of him; rubbed his ear and stood looking towards the mountain. Peter never moved. Slowly Hughy turned his eyes and fixed them on the back of Peter's head. "It—" He stopped, and rubbing his ear again stooped

to tie his boots. "It'll be a brave mornin', Peter," he said at last, shyly and with diffidence as might one who speaks to a king.

Then Peter turned, sharp and suddenly, his eyes flashing scorn.

"I'd be ashamed," he said; "I'd be ashamed. Lyin' in your bed at this hour o' the day! This is what marryin's done for ye—this is what comes o' your foolery! Chut!" Peter sniffed, snapped his jaws. "Lyin' in your bed—snorin' in her arms—leavin' me to come dunderin' at the dure! Chut!—I'd be ashamed—I'd be ashamed." And turning on his heel Peter went trudging for the road.

But Hughy only smiled, laughed softly, glanced at the little curtained window beyond the door; then stepped for his scythe and went swinging down the *boreen*. "Poor ould Peter," he said; "poor ould Peter. Sure it's hard he feels it—och, ay!" And Hughy laughed again.

II

THE two came to the road, turned and faced towards Emo. On this side walked Peter, grim and small; on that Hughy, big and ruddy. The whole width of the road ran broad between them, and across it from one to the other passed not so much as a word. Sometimes Peter muttered to himself, or flung an oath at the hedge; once or twice Hughy broke into dismal whistling that ended soon and abruptly; but from one to the

other went never a word. Peter walked stiffly with his face to the road, Hughy strode loosely with his eyes roaming the fields; the misty sunlight glorified their faces, glistened on the scythe blades, flung long shadows back upon the dust.

They met two or three—one hastening to a fair, a girl going barefoot for the cows, a lad carrying eggs to the shop above—nodded, passed the time of day, went on. Some of the houses scattered along the wayside were still asleep, some just waking; here a mule went plodding round before the churn-shaft, there a woman in a white nightcap was feeding the chickens, here and there half-clad men stood shouldering the doorpost and sleepily eyeing the world through clouds of tobacco smoke. All the fields were heavy with dew; in the valleys and upon the hills were tatters of mist; not yet had my Lord the mountain revealed himself; the air held a whiff of cold, a blur of damp; upon the countryside still lay brooding the dull silence of the night.

On they went, out of Gorteen, into Lackan; and passing Lackan lough Hughy put down his scythe, left the road and came back with glistening face and dripping head. "That'll kill the sleep in me, I'm thinkin'," he said with a laugh, and shortened his stride, and wrung his hair, and glanced across at his partner. But Peter, still faithful to his own side of the road, only trudged on, nor looked round, nor spoke; and it was no less than an oath that he muttered in his teeth.

At Stonegate they turned down towards Emo; turned again at foot of the hill, went along the bog lane, across

between the potato fields and came soon to a meadow lying lush and wet in the valley between Rhamus and Emo. Here lay their day's work; here in sight of the purpling heather, and close to the unceasing rustle of the wheat, and facing the vivid beauty of the mounded hills.

Quickly they got to work. Upon a ditch they laid their coats, tightened belts, loosened shirt necks, buckled knee straps; then out came the whet-stones, backs were bent, the valley rang with the music of the scythes. *Ting-a-ling*, sang the blades, *ling-ling, ting-a-ling*; then paused a minute, flashed, swooped, went swishing through the grass.

With knees bent, toes turned inwards, back and shoulders twisting awkwardly, Peter went jerking along a swath, his feet dragging a ragged trail upon the stubble, head wagging stiffly, arms outstretched and plucking like things of wood. Some paces behind came Hughy, swinging along with a mighty swagger, sweeping down the grass as one might switch thistle heads, tumbling it at Peter's heels as a wave strews seaweed along the beach. "Come," he seemed to say, and crouched in his might, "out o' me way there! Come down, come down—an' look out for your heels, Peter Jarmin!" Only Hughy never spoke a word, or Peter; never looked in each other's eyes as they turned for a new swath, never passed a word as they stood rubbing and whetting, nor sang as they worked, nor whistled. Like two machines they went up and down, and stood sharpening, and bent again, and went swishing along—and for companion of toil had silence. For Hughy had

little to say and could not say it, and Peter had much and dared not. They were waiting—waiting.

Then all suddenly, whilst you might clap your hands almost, the sun cried himself King and the morning broke. From the valleys and hilltops all the mists were licked up. Just a roll and a scattering and there stood my Lord the mountain smiling in his freshness and radiance. In a flash the spell of night was broken and all the country was awake, lying there in its gay serenity laughing up at the sun. From everywhere came the sounds of life. Above in Emo was a great commotion of work. On the fields, spreading gaily now from hill to hill, stood out all suddenly the shapes of horses and men, of cattle and sheep; calves were lowing, dogs barking, children shouting; the dewdrops dried on the hedges, a wind sprang from the west and shook the meadow dry. Up and down went the swallows, flashing and twittering. The scythes found a merrier note, a sharper twang as they met the grass. Even the mowers, down in their stolid depths, felt something stir responsive to that sudden change in things. Peter, trudging down between the swaths, pushed back his hat, drew a hand across his forehead, looked slowly across the shining countryside and grunted unwilling approval. Hughy, striding at Peter's side, raised face to the sky, turned this way towards the mountain, and that towards Rhamus hill; gave his head a jerk at last and cried to himself that the change was wonderful. He was awake now, wide awake, just as the big world was awake and all upon it—Peter and all. His eye took a merrier twinkle; his face found its old ruddy freshness; in the

swing of arms and shoulders, and the vigour of his stride, seemed typified the insolent strength and freedom of the morning. "Ah, dang me, but it's the powerfulest weather," said he, and laid down his scythe, and tightened his belt, and looked towards home and Lizzie; "the powerfulest I ever seen. Man, but it'll be a scorcher the day," said Hughy; then lifted scythe and fell in upon a new swath at Peter's heels.

But Peter gave no sign that he had heard, none that he wished to speak. Like a thing of wood, that creaked almost as it went, he jerked up the meadow, turned and trudged down between the swaths, bent and went jerking back. And patiently, silently, Hughy swung up behind him, turned and strode down beside him. They were awake, were the mowers, wide awake; but speech still slept within them waiting for the awakener to come. *Is she never coming?* thought Hughy, and for the twentieth time looked toward the hills; *is she never coming?* *She scoffed me,* thought Peter, and in his mind's eye had view of a wind-swept field and of a scornful woman standing back along the ridges; *she scoffed me,* thought Peter and set his lips; *she laughed at me an' called me names; she threw me over an' chose—him!* Peter's head jerked backwards. "But wait," said Peter within himself; "just wait!"

III

"An' what ails him?"

"I dunno. He's—he's unknowable the day."

"Ye tell me he hasn't spoke a word to ye all these hours?"

"Divil a word since he tongued me yonder on the street."

"Tongued ye? An' for what?"

"Ach, an' didn't ye hear him? For bein' late in risin', it was. 'This is your marryin',' says he; 'lyin' there snorin' in her arms. . . .' But sure ye heard him?"

Lizzie laughed, and her eyes twinkled merrily as they turned and rested on Peter jerking along out in the meadow. She was sitting in shade of the hedge, her back to the ditch, knees up-gathered and clasped with both hands, a shawl round her shoulders and on her head a pink sunbonnet. Near her sat Hughy upon the stubble; beside him a basket and a tin can, in this hand a mug of lukewarm tea, in that a slice of bread fried and browned in bacon fat. "Ah, sure," said she and laughed again; "sure now." She glanced at Hughy; looked at Peter; laughed once more. "That's what ails him?" said she; then raised her voice and called: "*Peter—Peter Jarmin. I say, Peter.*" No answer. "*Ye hear me, Peter?*" Still no answer—and from Hughy no more than a grunt. "*Peter,*" called Lizzie, softly, lurkingly. "*Hoi-i-i, Peter.*"

Out in the meadow Peter turned, looked up the field and down the field, this way and that; then bent his back and went on mowing.

"*Peter. Hoi-i-i, Peter.*" Lizzie laughed softly—and Hughy with her. "*Hoi-i-i, Peter.*"

Out in the meadow Peter turned again, played again

his little comedy of pretence; shaded his eyes at last and looked at Lizzie. "Well," he shouted. "What is it?"

"Aren't ye comin' to rest yourself?" Peter looked away. "Sure it's breakfast time." Peter stood looking towards Emo, frowning and rubbing his ear. "Och, aren't ye comin' to see me, Peter?"

Out in the meadow Peter laid down his scythe, pulled a pipe from his pocket; came stepping clumsily towards the hedge over the swaths. The sun fell clear upon him, making him look small and stern and ugly. He seemed all patches and hair and wrinkles, thought Lizzie, as narrowly she watched him with shaded eyes; looked old and ugly.

"Good mornin' to ye, Peter. An' how's yourself now?"

"Mornin'." A finger groping in his pipe-bowl and his hat over his eyes, Peter came on across the swaths; turned and sat down beside Hughy with his back to the ditch. Pulling out a clasp knife and a tin tobacco box he fell to redding his pipe into his palm. His lips were set. He took no heed of Hughy, none the slightest of Lizzie. She looked at him awhile, bending forward and peering round her sunbonnet; then nudged Hughy with her elbow and nodded at the basket; then glanced at Peter; then, with a laugh at Hughy's look of puzzlement, put her mouth to his ear and whispered softly.

"Eh?" Hughy looked at the basket, the can, at Peter. "Ah, to be sure," he said; "to be sure. Arrah, what ails me at all, at all? I say, Peter—Peter, me son—there's more here nor I'd ate in twice. Come now, help me wi' it. . . ."

Peter turned slowly; looked at Hughy, caught the twinkle in Lizzie's eye. "I want nothin'," said he; and again, in face of Hughy's persuasion, "I want nothin', I say"; and once more, even as Hughy put can and basket at his elbow, "I tell ye I'll take nothin' from ye—not a morsel."

Hughy leant back against the ditch, laughed, brought forth his pipe. "Aw, very good," said he. But Lizzie bent forward, flung back her sunbonnet and set her face at Peter. "Then you'll take it from me, Peter?" said she, very softly, in the voice of the sootherer. "Ah, now. From me—sure you'll take it from me?"

"I want nothin'—I'll take nothin'—I tell ye I had me breakfast. . . ."

"Ach, but a morsel like that, Peter? An' a drig o' tay? Sure you'll take it from me?"

Peter looked at the can and basket. He was dubious. Hunger was fighting pride in him, and Lizzie's voice came cheering hunger on. What if he did have a bite and sup? What if he did do as she asked? Sure he owed her nothing, owed Hughy nothing . . . and 'twas a long day to dinner-time. Involuntarily—driven by hunger, you might say—his hand reached for the basket. "There now!" cried Lizzie. "Sure I knew he would." And the thing was done.

An elbow on her knee and chin in hand, Lizzie sat looking out across the meadow and the wheat towards Bilboa and the roofs of Bunn. Beside her, Hughy lay smoking and Peter sat munching and sipping; but it was not of them, not of their present selves and doings she sat thinking, but of both as she had seen them one day

four months ago, back there near the road, in a field then wind-swept and bare and now green and lush with planted crop. . . . Ah, the day that had been; the dreary bitter day. How well she remembered it—the cruel wind, the black sky, the naked fields. She saw it all. There was the long ridge with Hughy and Peter working upon it; there was the fire by the ditch, there was herself with an apron full of seed-cuts. . . . The temper she had been in that day, the miserable humour; the sharp things she said to Hughy, the bitter things to Peter, the way she laughed and jeered at the man when he came down the ridge and asked her to have him. To have him? Lord, Lord! Poor, poor Peter; he felt it sore. But what else could she do? Marry Peter—ould, ugly Peter? Aw, sure! . . . Ah, the day that had been; the way it went; the way it ended. Could she ever forget that walk along the road, with Hughy stammering, and herself pretending not to understand, him this side and she that—and his arms round her at last in the middle of the road. 'Twas lovely. She could never forget it; never, never. . . . And now the sun was shining, and she was married, and all was well. She was content, happy as the day was long. She felt ready to jump up, race through the swaths and tumble in the grass. . . . Only Hughy would laugh at her, and Peter would sneer. Peter—Peter? Lord, the ugly man he was! Look at him sitting there munching, all skin and bone, hair and wrinkles. Ugh! Suppose instead of marrying Hughy she had married Peter? Ugh! It made her shiver. . . . Still she pitied the man. She had been short with him

and very cruel; she had cut him to the quick. He had felt it sore; he was feeling it now. The poor man, the poor lonely man! Look at him, all skin and bone, all withered and wrinkles. Twenty years more than his age he looked. Poor, poor Peter!

"Ah, but it's the beautiful day," said Lizzie, looking round the fields. "It's lovely. Sure it's well to be alive." Hughy, lying against the ditch with his hat over his eyes, grunted a word of assent. Peter drained the tea can, set it on the stubble; looked as though he had not heard. Lizzie turned. "Isn't it, Peter?" she said.

"What?"

"Well to be alive."

"Supposin' you're not dead—" Peter sniffed in his sardonic way "—an' not married," he added, with a turn of his eye.

Lizzie laughed softly; nudged Hughy; laughed again.

"Ay, indeed," she said; "ay, indeed. Well, maybe you're right, Peter."

"I know it," Peter snapped. "I know it."

"Is it about the marryin' ye know, Peter?" Lizzie's voice was silken. "Or is it the bein' dead?"

"I was niver dead," came back scornfully. "I thank God I was niver married."

Again Lizzie laughed and nudged Hughy. She paused a minute; then:

"But what d'ye know about marryin', Peter, if ye niver tried it?"

"Know? Know!" Peter flashed round. "What is it I don't know? Haven't I eyes? Haven't I ears?"

Isn't it enough to hear the impudence o' some people, an' see the brazen faces o' them, to make ye know too much? Phat!" Peter sneered and scoffed. "Marryin'? May the Lord keep me from it."

This was the real Peter at last, the man with a snarl and a snap, whose tongue had an edge and a flash, who schemed hard, fought hard, never forgot. He had found himself with a vengeance. The awakener had come over the hills, and across the potato fields, rousing speech from its sleep. Ill-humoured he might still be, revengeful and spiteful; but dumb he was no longer, nor should be again that day. "Marryin'?" cried he—ah, so bitterly. "May the Lord keep me from it!"

Hughy raised a corner of his hat, turned and looked up at Lizzie. Lizzie round the edge of her sunbonnet flashed a twinkling look down at Hughy. *Never heed the man, it's all talk*, said Hughy's eyes. *Just lie there an' listen*, flashed Lizzie's in reply. So Hughy smiled below his hat; and Lizzie laughed within her sunbonnet, and looked at Peter, and said:

"It isn't always, Peter, you'd be talkin' like that, now."

"Isn't it, *Mrs. Fitch*? I'm thankful to ye."

"You're welcome, *Mr. Jarmin*." Lizzie paused a moment, taking breath as it were after this measuring of swords; then crouched and thrust. "An', if ye ask me, it's mighty little help you'll be needin' from the Lord to keep ye from the marryin'—ay, mighty little."

"I niver asked ye," came back. "I asked ye nothin'."

"Didn't ye, now!" Lizzie flushed and warmed. "Well, ye got it all the same."

"An' I don't thank ye." Peter's voice was cold as steel, as hard and brittle. He sat drawing at his pipe, knees pulled up, arms crossed upon them, his eyes looking straight out across the swaths. "I don't thank ye," said he, "for what I don't want."

"Then don't," cried Lizzie, sharply, viciously; "don't. I want your thanks as little as I want anything belongin' to ye. I want them as little——"

Hughy put out a hand and clutched Lizzie's wrist. "Whisht, woman," he said; "ach, whisht!"

But Lizzie was roused, her tongue keen for the fray. She twisted from Hughy's grip, leant forward, fixed Peter with flashing eyes. "I want them as little," she said, "as I wanted them one day four months ago back there in a field be the road. Ye hear that, Peter Jarmin—ye hear that?"

Peter looked at the sky, round at the heather, up towards Emo. "I hear it," said he. "It'd be hard not to hear—it's just what I'd expect to hear from a woman." He sniffed; looked at his pipe; smiled in his steely way.

Again Hughy caught Lizzie by the arm and whispered persuasively; and again Lizzie twisted free, scouting interference. To be spoken to like that—herself a decent married woman!

"Yis," cried she, with a fling and a toss; "yis; an' there's plenty more, Peter Jarmin, ye can hear from her—plenty more. You an' your *woman*! You an' your *man*! Look at him—aw, sakes alive, look at the man!

Look at himself sittin' there askin' the Lord to keep him from marryin'—himself that a beggarwoman wouldn't wink at—himself that would ha' given his own two eyes, four months ago, if I'd only listened to him. Look at him," cried Lizzie and pointed a quivering finger at Peter's withered face. "Look at him," she cried, scorning pitilessly.

Hughy sprang upright, grasped a boot in either hand and sat looking perplexedly at the stubble. He disliked these scenes; all this rubbing of old sores pained him to the heart. But what could he do? He looked at Peter, sitting there by the ditch and stolidly eyeing the hills; then turned to Lizzie, a piteous look in his slow gray eyes. "Ach, whisht, woman," he pleaded; "woman dear, have wit."

But Lizzie was stone to plea or pity. "I'll not," she snapped; "I'll not whisht, Hughy."

Then Peter turned his face. "Arrah, why would ye stop her, Hughy?" said he, his voice doleful with complaint. "Sure the more she says the more I'm thankful that the Lord kept me from marryin' her. Let her talk, man; let her talk."

That was a merciless thrust, and for a moment Lizzie was at a loss to meet it. Her first impulse of defence urged the rushing hysterically at Peter's face; but she crushed that down, sat gasping a moment, then, whilst you might wink an eye, transformed herself. Her eyes softened and her face; her hands loosened, her body relaxed, and she rose, stepped a little way from the ditch and turned.

"Peter Jarmin," said she, a hand on her hip the other

hanging free, "I ax your pardon. 'Twas the foolish word I was sayin'. You're an ould man an' I ought to have respected your gray hairs. I take back all I've said—ivery word—an' I give ye me pity in its place." How softly fell the honey-bitter words; how deeply cut the silken lash. "'Twas mean o' me to reproach ye for what happened between us—both of us did what we couldn't help. Ay, we did; we did. You were too ould, I was too young—sure that was all. . . ."

Lizzie fell to looping the strings of her sunbonnet; her brows rose slightly, her voice took its everyday note. "How's all at home, Peter?" said she. "I'm hopin' the ould mother is bravely?"

Peter sat looking up at her, pulling at an empty pipe and sitting crouched over his up-gathered knees. But he answered not a word; only sat looking grimly up at this—this viper of a woman. And yet—yet how handsome she was!

"It'll be powerful lonely yonder at home, I'm thinkin'," Lizzie continued and plucked at her apron, "all be your lone selves. Aw, sure an' it must. Hughy an' meself get it dull enough at times for all that we're young an' merry—don't we Hughy?—but what in sorrows' name it must be for two ould people I can't imagine. I'd be seein' ghosts an' frettin' me heart out all the night. Ah, well"; Lizzie sighed, looked round the field; "it's always the way—there's always someone under a cloud to make up for them that's in the sunshine. Ah, sure. Some day maybe it'll be me own turn—but no matter, no matter. God knows I pity ye, Peter Jarmin, feelin' as I do. Sure I feel this minute as if I could

niver be ould. Dear knows, I think there can't be as happy a woman in all the world. Not one; not one."

Lizzie sighed contentedly; then picked up the can and basket, hung them on her arm and prepared to go. "Well, I suppose I must be for home," she said; "aw yis. There's the dinner to be gettin' for ye, Hughy, so I'll have to be steppin'. Take good care o' yourself, an' don't be workin' Peter so hard—sure it's cruel to be drivin' ould age too fast. Good-bye to ye both." And away down the swaths tripped Lizzie, singing softly as she went.

Then Hughy rose, stretched, went striding towards his scythe. But Peter sat on awhile, crouched over his knees and looking after Lizzie. "An ould man," he muttered; "an ould man! That's what she called me—that's what she called me again. An ould man—an ould man. . . . Aw, the divil!"

IV

THE morning wore on. Slowly the sun climbed up and up, waxing brighter and hotter with every stride. The wind came in languid puffs, whispering among the wheat, dallying with the grass, sighing itself to sleep against the hedges. All the countryside was full of life, colour; the air was wondrous clear; you could see the houses upon the mountain, the roofs of Bunn, the very stones in Rhamus castle; and away up into the blue you looked, away beyond the sun. From the heather came

a murmur of voices and a sound of whistling, from the road a dull rumble of carts; here and there among the hills a mowing machine went whirring; up in Emo dogs were barking, fowls cackling, voices rising noisily; and here a cow stood lowing, and there a donkey braying, or a shot rang out, or an oar clanked, or one went singing lustily across the fields. All was green and fresh, cheerful and sunny; you looked at the hills and they were shining, at the mountain and it stood blue, at the valleys and they lay flowing with colour—purple upon the heather, brown along the meadows, silvern where the river ran, bright green in the patches of crop and pasture, sea-green upon the hedges, sage-green among the rushes and the willows upon the peat-banks. It was a king of days—a day through which a man might go and say that he had lived.

Out beyond the swaths the mowers toiled on, smitten pitilessly by the sun. Both were stripped to the shirt and trousers, neck-bands open, sleeves rolled high, hats pushed back upon nape and crown. Hughy's shirt was wet below the armpits, soaked about the neck and waist, clinging tight to his back as a cotton skin; but Peter's flapped dry as a bone. When Hughy, turning for a new swath, wiped his brow his arm glistened from wrist to elbow; but Peter's scraped over the parched wrinkles with a withered sound of dryness. The sun sucked at Peter unavailingly, warmed him as it might warm a stone, wrought nothing but freckles on the brown leanness of his arms; but Hughy it smote, working in him riot and ferment, boiling his blood, baking his bones, making him smoke along the stubble.

They worked hard, stopping only to whet scythes, or trudge to the drinking can, or turn down between the mounded rows, their feet crushing the eyes of fallen daisies, pressing the life from tumbled thistle and meadow-sweet, driving corncrakes in panic through the grass or crushing wounded frogs into the stubble. The burden of work and of the day was heavy, but they bore it uncomplainingly; accepting it as they accepted most things—hunger and cold, pain and trouble, life and death—with an air of sullen indifference, of philosophic resignation to the inevitable—the inevitable before which your sapient ran cheerfully nor lingered to be kicked. They looked out upon the glories of earth and sky, the wonders of sunshine and shade, with indifferent eyes, seeing only what a thousand times they had seen, and knew by heart, and hoped by God's mercy to see often again. It was just the trees with them, the crops, the grass, the hills and the cattle, the valleys and the meadows, the sun that shone and the men that worked. 'Twas a grand day for work, so it was—and God be thanked. 'Twas powerful fine the weather was—and God send the spell might last till the meadow was won. 'Twas odious hot the sun was—and sure it was getting high, and coming near twelve o'clock and time for a rest. So they swung, and sharpened, and trudged, and mowed; and now thought it time for a smoke or a drink, and now time to tighten a belt or to rub down and sharpen: and Time rolled on, and Death came nearer, and the Earth spread out her bravery, and upon one or other did the mowers waste never a thought.

They talked as they worked of this trifle and of

that—of the price of pork and butter, the results of potato spraying, the latest countryside scandal, the newest development in Imperial politics; and always was Peter Sir Oracle, and seldom did Hughy add to the conversation more than his yea and nay. Over his shoulder did Peter fling his dicta, turning his head a little and twisting his lips at snap of jaw; and stolidly Hughy trudged on, moon-face to the grass, eyes on his flashing blade, smiling at Peter's cackling, answering whenever he might. "Aw, ay," said Hughy; "aw just so": and away went Peter, careering on the pinions of speech, shouting and spouting, trying his hardest to drown thought in a torrent of words. But sometimes, a pause coming, up flared thought, and Peter was mumbling: "An ould man; an ould man. . . . Aw, the viper!" And, even as the sun waxed, so did thought flare the brighter and oftener, till at last his ears surged with his own mumbblings, and Lizzie's face burnt scornful before him, and with set lips he went jerking along, plucking murderously at the very daisies. "An ould man," snarled he; "an ould man. . . . Ah, the viper!"

And so the morning grew.

V

"THEN I'd make her, Hughy Fitch; I'd make her heed me. D'ye think I'd stand any of her nonsense, if I'd chance to be in your place? Phat—not me! D'ye imagine I'd lie there hearin' her throw her divilments at me friends an' neighbours? Phat—not me! Aw, be the Lord, but I'd teach her—I'd teach her!"

It was high noon, and, in shade of an oak that stood out in the meadow, the mowers were resting. Hughy, his back against the tree, legs crossed and arms folded, sat looking out across the heather, his eyes seeing nothing, lips hardly moving round his pipe shank. Close by, squat on the stubble, back hunched, head twisted, eyes gleaming, Peter sat glaring at Hughy. "Aw, be the Lord, but I'd teach her," he cried; "I'd teach her!"

Hughy answered nothing. Peter glared, sniffed disdainfully; spread a hand.

"I tell ye again, Hughy Fitch, that I'd make her heed me. If so be she dared to say what fell from her there be the ditch this mornin', I tell ye she'd say it once but she'd niver say it again. Be the king," cried Peter, "I'd wollop her!"

Hughy looked slowly round, hooked a finger about his pipe and drew it from his lips. "Would ye now?" said he, with a nod.

"Yis I would—be the king, but I would!"

"I know." Again Hughy nodded in his grave way. "An' for what would ye?"

"For what? For what!" Peter's voice came shrilling. "Heavenly hour, is it a fool ye are? For what? ye say; an' you listenin' to her yourself! Didn't ye hear—didn't ye hear? Or were ye asleep?"

"I heard," said Hughy.

"Well? Well?"

"An' I heard *you*, Peter." Hughy paused; considered a moment; looked away. "I heard *you*, Peter; an' if ye want me opinion o' things I'd answer, that

ye got no more than ye earnt. Ye were as bad as her—mebbe ye were worse.”

Had Hughy been pronouncing from the Bench his judgment had not been given with greater weight of deliberation; and hearing it Peter blazed to sudden wrath, twisted round on his knees and leant toward Hughy.

“*Worse, ye say?*” Peter spat out the words. “*Worse nor her!*” Hughy did not answer. “*Worse,*” cried Peter; “*worse nor her that gibed at me, an’ scorned me, an’ called me—*” Peter stopped abruptly; then moistened his lips and stretched an arm. “*You’ll answer me just this one thing, Hughy Fitch,*” he said, slowly, almost solemnly; “*did ye hear her callin’ me—over there be the ditch, this very mornin’—did ye hear her callin’ me an’ ould man? Answer me, Hughy Fitch.*”

“*I did.*”

“*An’ ye call me worse nor her!*”

A slow light of laughter shone in Hughy’s eyes. He blinked solemnly at his boots; but said nothing.

“*Mebbe—mebbe you’d be agreein’ wi’ her?*” Peter’s face shot forward; his voice held a sinister note of warning. “*Mebbe you’d be agreein’ wi’ her?*” said he.

But Hughy was master of the moment; ready too with an answer which more than once already, back within those four months of Peter’s brooding, had stayed his wrath.

“*Well no,*” drawled he; “*hardly that. I’d say no more, Peter, nor that ye were past your youth. An ould man? Naw—naw. I’d not say that.*”

The crisis seemed passed. Peter drew in his face; sat back on his heels; rubbed his chin with dubious thumb and forefinger. The answer was satisfying; but he had heard it before; and—and . . . Ah, there were other things that could never be satisfied.

"I know," said he; then, in a flash: "but you'd listen to *her* tellin' it to me. Ay, you'd listen to *her*; you'd lie yonder an' hear her an' niver lift a finger. Naw, ye wouldn't, Hughy Fitch." Out flashed Peter's hands. "I tell ye she's a liar. I tell ye I'm no ould man. I tell ye I'm as good as you, any day—an' better, an' better! Look at me." Peter spread his scraggy arms. "Look at the work I do." Peter shot a hand towards his scythe: "Look at me with ivery hair on me head, an' ivery tooth in me jaw, an' me able to hold me own wi' the best in the countryside. An' yit—an' yit she'd call me *that*; and you'd sit by hearin' her. . . ."

Then Hughy put away his pipe, pushed back his hat and rose.

"I'm weary of ye, Peter," said he; "for you're talkin' foolishness. Man, have wit! Suppose she did say it to ye? Sure she meant nothin'."

"But she did. I say she did." Peter sprang to his feet, quick as Jack in a box. "I say she meant twice as much as nothin'. 'Twas the same word she used, back there in the pitaty field, the day I axed her to have me—an' she laughed at me, an' jeered me, an' said I was only half a man, an' was only fit to herd ducks—'twas the same word she flung in me face. 'You're an ould man,' said she; 'only an ould man. . . .'"

“Ach, have wit, Peter,” said Hughy. “Man alive, have sense!”

But Peter and wit had parted friends that morning. He was brimming with venom. That wound given him four months ago by Lizzie, and through her by this big-hearted Hughy, was galling still, was wide open again and burning sore. He flung out a clenched fist.

“I tell ye she’s a liar,” cried he; “I tell ye——”

Hughy turned quickly.

“I wouldn’t be sayin’ that, Peter,” he said, part counselling, part threatening.

“Wouldn’t ye?” Peter craned forward, arms straight and rigid, neck a tangle of straining cords. “Well I’ll say it, then—an’ to yourself, Hughy Fitch, that she fooled into marryin’ her. She’s a liar, I say, an’ she’s a”

Hughy strode forward, clutched Peter by the shoulder and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. “Take back the word,” he growled between his teeth; “take back the word or, be the livin’ world, I’ll choke your breath!”

But Peter writhed and snarled; hung limp a moment in Hughy’s grip then suddenly plucked himself free.

“Back?” he shouted. “Back! I’ll take back no word. I’ll say what I like. Whew-w-w! To blazes wi’ you an’ her.” Peter danced up to Hughy, crouching and snapping his fingers. “That for ye—an’ that—an’ that!” he shrilled, his eyes a blaze of spiteful fury. “An’ that for her that fooled ye, Hughy Fitch, an’ made ye the laughin’ stock o’ the country. . . .”

"Take back the word," said Hughy, and clenched his fists and strode again; "take back the word."

"Back? Ay; an' there's it for ye again," cried Peter and flung a hand towards Hughy. "She's a liar, I say again—a liar—a liar! Ye hear me?" Peter came dancing and crouching, a finger crooked before his twitching face. "Ye hear me? An' she's worse nor that. She's a"

A mean word of reproach, not nearly the worst in the world, but quite the worst that ever in Ireland is flung at a woman, was on Peter's lips, hanging there the while he crouched with crooked forefinger watching anger gather and deepen on Hughy's face; hung there whilst you might count a score, then, with a splutter of defiance, sped for the deep mine of Hughy's anger. Like a flash it fell and quick upon it came the answering roar: and Peter was crouching mute, and Hughy coming with outstretched arms and his eyes blazing murder. "She's a——" cried Peter; then crouched, shrank back, whined piteously, turned in a panic and fled.

Out across the stubble, with Hughy raging at his heels, went Peter, bareheaded, gasping, running as for dear life. Over the swaths he ran, between the trees, down the slope; came to his scythe, snatched it and whirled round defiantly. "Come on—come on," he cried; then, at sight and sound of Hughy's onset, flung down the scythe and terror-smitten went plunging through the meadow. "Aw, Lord, Lord," he chattered; "Lord of Heaven, he'll murder me!"

Down through the meadow, with Hughy striding giant-like behind, sped Peter, hands clenched before

him, eyes straining, head twisted towards a shoulder; sped through the gap, along by the wheat, into the river meadow and there, well-nigh spent, scrambled over a ditch, took up a stone and faced about. "I'll brain ye," he panted; "I'll brain ye—if ye dare to lay a hand on me. I'll—I'll" The stone went whizzing, crashed into a tree: like a whipped cur Peter bolted for the hills, craven fear plucking at his very breath. "Aw," he whined; "aw, Lord in heaven look down upon me! Help, help! Murder—murder—murder!"

Up the hill, with Hughy tracking remorselessly in his steps, toiled Peter, foam on lips, weariness in his bones, despair at his heart. Up—up, he went, slower and slower; nearer—nearer, came Hughy, thundering and raging; a last effort he made, then, his heart nearly bursting, sprawled in the rushes and lay heaving on his face. "Aw," he moaned; "spare me, spare me! Ah, Hughy, Hughy—Hughy, Hughy! Is it me? Is it me!"

Hughy took him by the shoulders, turned him over, pulled at his arms. "Stand up," he said; "stand up, ye cur!"

But Peter shrank back shivering. "Ah, Hughy—Hughy," he wailed. "Is it kill me you'd do? Is it me? Is it me!"

"Stand up, ye cur!"

"Ah, no—no. Ah, my God, Hughy!"

"Stand up, ye snivellin' cur!"

Then Peter stood; and only once did Hughy strike him; but the mark of that striking Peter Jarmin will carry with him down to his grave.



THE HAYMAKERS





I

THE BIT O' PRINT

WE had come, once more, to the big meadow which from the Crockan-foot runs far along Thrasna river; and already had we more than half of it safely won and gathered. Never before (not even in that famous summer, years ago, that saw Jan Farmer master in Emo) had haymaking brought fewer cares or pleasanter toil. The weather was glorious—bright, firm August days; help was plentiful; you had but to mow, turn on the swath and carry in: only to work and pray God for much of His good sunshine.

And how we did work in that time of golden weather! Hardly had the mist begun to rise o' mornings, when you heard the traces jingle as the horses went over the fields from Emo; like ghosts, you saw them plodding home of evenings through the dusk. All day long the whirr of the mowing machine, the hum of the tedder, and the shouts of young Hal as he sat urging the horses, came untiringly over the hills. It was up with the lark, wash the sleep from your eyes, thank God for your breakfast; then strip like a man, shoulder rake and fork and boldly face the big sun. From dew-rise to dew-fall that was our day. It was do or die with us; for who but a fool ever dallies when the sun chases rain from Irish hills? And had not the pigs flown joyfully, so said the wise-heads, when last the river meadow was made in August?

At it then, lads, said we; at it with might and main. Never heed the morrow: heed you only this glorious to-day. See the splendour of it; not a speck in the blue, the horizon firm as brass, the sun marching royally for his kingdom beyond the mountain. Now, now is the time. Four great days already have we had; four days yet please God are in store: with a shout then and a heart, my lads, with a heart and a shout!

So one and all we buckled to. Ah, but we were happy; hard as nails, brown as turf, strong as young bulls. How we shouted and sang, jibed and cheered; how the hills rang with our clamour! It was a very feast of work, a mad riot of sweet toil. For months had the weather been playing with us; now were we flouting it, late and early were stealing marches upon it, early and late were making ready for the great time when radiantly we should point to work well done and jeeringly ask of the enemy to do its worst.

Yes; that great time was coming: but when? Who could tell? Poor Ireland's weather goddess, even at best, was a fickle jade; who could tell what torrents of tears lay deep behind the flash of her smile? To-morrow it might be pouring; a week hence might see the river level with its banks; ten days might go and leave the water soaking to the roots of the hills; already that cloud, no bigger than a hand, might be gathering on the horizon. Who could tell?

Often we looked for that cloud; often, that day, had we turned to the west, dreading to see it: even now, the Master, as he stands leaning on his rake, has thought of it. He wipes his forehead, turns and looks back on

the long stretch of clear, yellow stubble. It is good, he thinks; very good. Another three days, he thinks, and looks towards the mowing machine, would finish all. Three days? Will the spell hold for three days? he wonders. Warily he eyes the horizon, warily scans the sky. Yes, the spell will last; he is sure of it. Softly he hums a tune: the next minute at sight of a girl coming through the haycocks, throws down his rake, seats himself stiffly on a pile of hay and shouts that it is tea-time.

At the word, down went the rakes and forks (for what Irishman of worth ever dallies in sight of tay?), and from all sides we came flocking in. James Daly, that man of wit and wisdom, came hurrying; and with him, Fat Anne his wife. Mike Brady the choleric, hastened up; little yellow Mrs. Judy at his heels, and wee Johnny the gossoon at hers. James Trotter (Wee James once and always), now grown thin, and stooped somewhat under family cares, slid from a half-built ruck, and, his soul thirsting for Congo, came running and wiping his mouth; Annie his wife, once Miss Marvin and a Tom-boy, now the buxom mother of three, put down the hay-twister, took up her baby from its place by a haycock, and soberly joined the rest. Hal came swaggering up, three dogs at his heel and hat balanced on his crown; Jem came jumping the swaths like a steeplechaser; oneself strolled soberly in and took one's place in the ring which already had closed round Bidly and her basket, and her can of steaming tea.

The Master pulled off his rush hat and flung it upon the hay.

"Now, Biddy," said he; "now, my girl."

"Ay, slap it out," went the voices. "Fire it round, Biddy, *agra*." . . . "Och, hearts alive, the whiff that tay has off it," said James Daly, as the lid came off the can.

"Ay," said Mike Brady, rubbing his lean jaw; "it's as fresh as the inside of a haystack, so it is. Aw, hurry up, Biddy me girl, hurry up."

So Biddy hurried up; into porringers and mugs emptied the can, piled bread and butter on the mouth of each, and from one to another went tripping and smiling.

"I'm obliged to ye, Biddy; more power to your elbow," said we; and fell to. The tongues lay silent; smack went the lips all round the ring: within five minutes you could not have found near Biddy's basket wherewith to feed a sparrow.

"Well thank God for that," said we; then wiped our lips and lay back for ten minutes' rest. The men set their pipes going; the women fell a-clacking; but the Master, who seldom smoked and whose eye was always quick for the sight of print, leant forward, pulled the paper lining from the tea-basket, and lying back against the hay, began to read. His mind was at ease; good humour, bred of good tea and good weather, possessed his soul; presently he snorted disdainfully, then chuckled sardonically, at last broke into a smothered laugh.

For a minute we sat watching him and waiting; then spoke Hal.

"Give us a chance, father," said he. "Man, don't keep it all to yourself."

"Oh, it's nothing," answered the Master; "only tomfoolery."

Again he read; again snorted disdainfully; in a minute rolled the paper into a ball and flung it out upon the stubble.

"It's tomfoolery," said he; then pulled his hat over his eyes, folded his arms and quickly went fast asleep.

Mike Brady rose, stepped across the stubble; came back with the ball of paper and sat down.

"I'll be wonderin' what the Master was snortin' at," said he; "an' it's a sin anyway to be wastin' good print. Sure as much as there's here," Mike went on, and began flattening out the paper upon his knee, "'d keep me in readin' for a whole night; an'—Aw," he broke forth; "aw, look at them! Look at the faces they have on on them, an' the grand dresses, an' the—Sure it's great! Look, Anne. Look, Judy. Come here, James, ye boy ye."

James Daly turned over on his knees and peered across Mike's shoulder. "Ay," said he; "think o' that, now."

Anne his wife, rested a hand on the stubble, leant over, glanced at the paper, and drew back with a sniff.

"Phat!" said she. "Sit where ye are, Judy. Sure it is only a piece of a fashion paper he's got hold of. Dear, dear, the ignorance o' men!"

Mike held the paper—it was a double sheet, with plates here and there among the letterpress—at arm's length, peered at it closely, looked at it sideways and up and down.

"Well, now," he went on, "divil as purty a set o'

women as them I iver seen before. There's one there—that one, James," and Mike laid a thumb on her classic features; "an' if she was a trifle shorter in the neck, an' hadn't that long-tailed jacket on her, she'd be as fine a female as the one on the awlmanick at home hangin' be the dresser. An' that one in the corner, wi' a hat on her as big as an umberell; now that lassie's a tear-away. An' there's another—d'ye see her, James? Herself wi' the gossoon in sailor's britches—that one, sure, has a powerful fine pair of eyes in her. Wouldn't that be your opinion, James?"

"Well," said James, cocking his wise head, "if ye ask me, Mike, I'd say they're too much like the kind you'd see in a sick cow—too big an' watery. But there's a woman," and James pointed at a figure with his pipe stem, "takes me fancy. That one'd be a powerful high-stepper, I'm thinkin'; an' she carries herself well inside that grand dress of hers."

Anne Daly nudged Judy Brady with her elbow and whispered behind her hand:

"D'ye hear the bletherskites," said she.

"Ay," answered Mike, and held the sheet away from him, "she's a tip-topper sure enough—a tip-topper. But she's fine in the bone, that one. Look at the hands on her, James. Now I'd be thinkin' she was more after the kind o' your race-horse, fit for little but prancin' about an' caperin'. It'd be a poor show she'd make in a meadow, James; it's not praties an' salt she'd thrive on."

"Aw, not at all," said James, sitting back in his place; "not at all. Sure she'd be what you'd call a lady—

they're all that kind; the wives o' the quality, an' their daughters, an' all that. Sure an hour o' that sun," James looked over his shoulder towards Emo hill, "'d scorch the skin on her. It would so."

"Ah, 'deed would it." Mike turned the sheet, pulled his hat over his eyes, gathered up his knees, rested his elbows upon them and began spelling among the letterpress. "'Deed it would. I accuse it's ladies they'd be. Yis."

Anne Daly turned to Judy Brady and Annie Trotter.

"It's God's mercy, girls," said she, with a mocking laugh, "that *we* can keep our skins whole on us. I wonder what the men these parts'd be doin', supposin' *we* were fine in the bone an' couldn't thrive on the praties an' salt?"

"Sure the cratures'd just gasp an' die," returned Judy Brady. "Sure they would."

James Daly winked solemnly across at Hal and myself, as soberly we sat, with an eye on the Master, taking half minute turns at Jem's elegant briar pipe. Annie Trotter took up her baby and turned from the company; James, her husband, lay down on the hay beside her and plaintively fell to liltin' a stave from *Garryowen*; *whew-whew* went the Master down into his beard; all softly Mike went mumbling and stumbling among the wonders of his bit o' print.

"It isn't ladies in fashion plates the likes of us'd be thanked for bein'," Anne went on, and spoke impersonally as if to the stumps on the Crockan. "It's not good looks, an' hats like umberella, an' eyes like sick cows, we'd be wantin'. Aw no, dears! It's an ould shawl

round our shoulders, an' a shillin' straw bonnet, an' a linsey dress at eightpence the yard, 'd be suitin' us. It's thank ye kindly, ~~we~~ must say when himself wi' the purse gives us a pair o' brown paper 'lastic-sides to go to mass in. It's patch the tatters, an' turn an' twist, an' darn an' sew, we must be doin' wi' the ould duds. Aw yis," said Anne, a trace of bitterness quick in her voice, "troth an' sowl it's the grand fashion plates we step into, God help us!"

Again James winked at Hal and myself, then turned slow eyes upon his wife.

"Divil as fine a lump of a woman iver wore a hook an' eye as yourself, Anne," said he. "Divil a fashion plate iver printed 'd be good enough to——"

"Ah, keep your bleather for the *ladies*, James Daly," cried Anne.

"I'm keepin' it," answered James, in his sly way. "It's to the finest lady in the country-side I'm talkin' this mortal minute. I wish to glory, Anne, I could cover ye in silk an' satin', an' give ye spring-sides with heels on them as high as a stool. Woman dear, wouldn't I be the proud man to see ye wollopin' off to mass in a green silk dress an' frills on it, an' a waist on ye as big round as the crown o' me hat, an' a big feather wagglin' out o' your head, an' a collar on ye that high one'd think 'twas a bearin' rein was keepin' your head back. An' there'd be poor me trudgin' after ye in me white corduroys, an' me ould brown frieze coat, an'——"

"An' you keepin' the sky from fallin' wi' a pitch fork," said Anne; "an' meself leadin' a mad pig be the

wings. Ah, hold your whisht, James Daly, an' ax the dog to learn ye sense!"

"Och, I needn't ax the dog, Mrs. Daly," drawled James. "Sure ivery time ye open your lips as much sense is wasted as'd be a God-send to a lunyctic asylum."

"It's a pity then ye kept your wits, Mr. Daly—such as they are."

"Ay, it is." James laughed softly and struck a match on his pipe bowl. "Sure it is. But, seein' that I'm a marrit man, mebbs it's somethin' of a credit to me."

"Ah, ye ould divil," cried Anne. She laughed merrily, rolled a wad of hay and flung it at James. "Ye ould blarneyin' divil," cried she; then turned and fell to flattery and foolishness at the feet of the infant Trotter.

Mike Brady ceased muttering, and with his precious bit o' print in his hand, came shuffling across the stubble.

"What'd that be all about, Mr. John?" asked he, leaning towards me and with his finger indicating the mystic column which in journals of fashion is devoted to correspondents and their enquiries. As well as I could, I made answer. Mike shuffled back to his place.

"Aw yis," said he, gathering up his knees again. "I was thinkin' 'twas somethin' like that. Well, now," he went on, with the sheet open before him, "it's a mighty curious thing, that—mighty curious. I accuse it's the first time I've iver seen the likes of it. Supposin', now, Mr. John, I made free to send a letter to the lassie that does the answerin', would she answer me?"

"Hardly, Mike. But she might answer Judy."

"Ay," said Mike; "just so. I was imaginin' 'twas only women she had to do with. But, surc, some o'

them must be mighty strange kind o' mortals. They must so. Now there's a lassie here—where is she? Ay, here she'll be, some one that calls herself *Stella*—an' it's my opinion she'll have powerful little to do in the world. I'm a bad hand at the readin'," said Mike, looking across at me; "an' there's words here that flummox me, but——"

"Read up, Mike," shouted Hal and Jem and I in a breath. "Fire it out, me son," said James Daly.

Mike turned his back to the sun and wet his lips. "Well, I'll do me best," said he; then, a finger slowly following his eyes across the sheet, word by word, often letter by letter, went on with the reply to *Stella*.

The reply was framed on classic lines, and held little of novelty. *Stella* was quite right in asking editorial advice as to the care and dressing of those ringlets of hers. The hair was a woman's glory. The poet Tennyson had written . . . (Behold Mike floundering through the wonders of poesy). The poet Ovid had beautifully observed . . . (Again Mike tripped and tumbled; then, the quotations being happily ended, went hurrying on.) Let *Stella* use an oval brush, night and morning, for ten minutes at least; let her give each side fifty strokes of a soft-toothed comb; let her . . . Mike stopped and looked up.

"D'ye know what?" said he. "I'm thinkin' that if 'twas fifty strokes of a heather switch that lassie got mebbe it'd benefit her health."

"It would so," said Hal and Jem and I in a breath.

"Serve her right if it's as bald as a bull's horn she gets," said Wee James.

"There's one o' your *ladies* for ye," sneered Anne Daly; but James, her husband, leant forward and gripped a boot in each hand.

"I'm thinkin'," said he, "it isn't on her hands an' knees that one crawls to bed o' nights as tired as a post horse. Naw."

"Naw," went the voices. "Danged if it is."

"It isn't on straw that one sleeps, I'm thinkin'," James continued, and looked at his wife as if to say: Now I'm on your side, Mrs. Daly. "An' it isn't out o' bed she jumps o' mornin's, wi' the feathers stickin' over her pate, an' hurries to get the childer's stirabout. Naw."

"Naw," went the voices again. "Danged if it is."

Then out spoke Anne, the wife of James.

"D'ye know what," said she, and looked at James as if to say: An' now I'm on my own side again, Mr. Daly; "d'ye know what me own private opinion is? I believe it's the men themselves that ask these kind o' questions. Sure ivery woman wi' hands on her knows how to comb her hair. An' sure the vanity o' the poor men is past all knowin'. Now, there's James beyont there must shave himself twice a week, no less; an' ivery blessed night he must wash himself in warm water, if ye please—ay, if the porridge was burnin' to a cinder; an' if you'd see him squintin' into a looking glass o' Sundays, arrangin' a curl here, an' a curl there, an' twistin' at the whiskers on him, sure it's die you'd do."

"Good for you, Anne," cried Hal and Jem and L. "Good, me girl!"

James leant towards his wife.

“It’s powerful free o’ the tongue you’ll be, the day, Mrs. Daly,” said he, softly and slyly; “an’ ojus ready to give meself the taste of it. Now, would ye be objectin’ to givin’ the company some trifles about yourself? Mebbe, you’d like to tell them about the time ye squeezed yourself that tight into a new dress you’d be havin’, that ye couldn’t ate your breakfast, an’ went pantin’ to chapel like a fish on grass, an’ had a face on ye as red as a boiled mangelf? Come, now, Mrs. Daly.”

That was the talk for a hay-field! *Ho, ho*, laughed the men. The women, excepting Anne, tittered and looked towards the river. “Ah, quit wi’ ye, James Daly,” said they. Mike Brady lowered his bit o’ print, and looked fixedly at Anne.

“He had ye there, Anne,” said he.

Anne sniffed. “Aw, divil’s the lie in that,” said she; “divil’s the one. But, faith, if I did squeeze meself into it, I didn’t burst it—an’ that’s more than James can say about his last pair o’ Sunday britches when he stooped to tie his boots.”

That was the talk for a hay-field! That was the talk that appealed to your free and easy haymakers, with their lungs full of good air, and their brains dancing with the fumes of good Congo; that was the kind of talk! Hal and Jem and myself lay back, shouting and kicking our heels; Wee James went *te-he, te-he* between his teeth, as if mimicking the splutter of a piston; Annie, James’ wife, with her face and baby turned from the company, shook with laughter; even little yellow Judy Brady contrived to force up a titter; on Anne’s

face was a broad light of triumph; James sat blinking at the sun, and towards him Mike Brady, the lean and dour, turned solemnly.

"You're bet, James?" said Mike, half asserting, half questioning.

James puckered his lips and looked hard at the ground, as though searching for a retort in the stubble.

"You're bet, James?" said Mike again, in the voice of the scorner.

Another minute James sat studying his boots; then turned over on an elbow and gave himself to the consolation of his pipe.

"I'm thinkin'," said he, almost blushing beneath his tan; "I'm thinkin' they're powerful smart fellows that be writin' these papers. They——"

Boo-o-o! With one voice we cried shame upon James. He a man! Beaten by his wife! He an Irishman! *Boo!*

The Master snorted; shot upright and looked at his watch.

"What—what," cried he. "What—what! Come, lads, come; there's work to be done."

II

A WRITIN' CHAP

QUICKLY we rose and spread across the meadow. Anne Daly and Judy Brady took their rakes and went turning the grass that lay heavy upon the river bank. Annie Trotter crooned over her baby; kissed it, laid it to rest in the shade of a haycock; with Jem began work again

with the rope-twister. Wee James took a run, leaped right over Mike Brady as he stooped to tie a boot, and skirling went plump into the middle of his half-built ruck. The Master yoked a horse to the slipe, put Johnny Brady at its head, gripped the handles, and with much bustle and *wo-hoing* fell to gathering in the long yellow rows. Away, among the newly-mown swaths, over whose fatness the speckled frogs went leaping and sprawling, and outside a high plot of grass in which the corn-crakes sat cowering among the daisies, Hal was yoking horses to the mowing machine, and, with an oath for every death, killing the flies that lay gorging their blood. A fine confusion of sounds—of shouting and laughter, of singing and swearing, of jingling and whirring and clanking—filled the meadow; all the air that stirred would not flap a shirt sleeve; like the breath of a furnace, the heat came pouring from the great brazen sun, swept over Emo hill and smote us there in the valley by the cool winding river.

It happened that I who write, had persuaded the Master, that same day, to let me try my skill (or what was left of it from the old days) in the building of a haycock. The chances were that I should fail, that half way up or farther, my feet would slip, or my head reel, and down come haycock, self and all. Still I was ready to take the chances; Hal and the rest were anxious to see me fail; there was no great pressure of work; immediately after tea, therefore, the Master nodded towards a pile of hay (called a *butt*, in those parts) and said I might try my luck.

So, not without some feeling of apprehension, or call

it responsibility, I stepped upon the unsteady butt and made ready to receive, and spread, and trample down, the forkfuls which James Daly should pitch to me. Mercy, but the foundation was uncertain; ah, but the sun was hot!

James spat on his hands, seized a fork and drove it into the ring of hay that lay piled all round us. "Now keep your houghs stiff," said he, over his shoulder; "stick one foot in the middle there, keep it steady an' spin round on it. Don't be floostered; keep your head; an' dang me, if ye don't stand on the top yit."

"All right, James," said I, and took the first forkful; "all right, but don't crowd me, man—don't crowd me."

Ah, very well. James was quite agreeable. But no need was there to begin fretting; no need in life, till the bulge of the ruck was passed. Let me shake it out, and put my foot down firm, and pay no heed to Master Jem. That was the ticket; prime I was getting on, prime.

"Now," James went on, bending for a forkful, "I'm thinkin' it's yourself, Mr. John, in the course o' your travels, has met more'n one o' these chaps that writes the papers?"

"You mean, editors?" said I, bending cautiously for an armful.

"I dunno what ye call them," answered James; "but I mean the lads that write the kind o' stuff Mike was readin' a while ago—them an' the rest o' them. Did iver ye meet e'er a one o' them boyos?"

"Not one, James."

"Now!" James paused a moment and knowingly

winked. "Now, ye don't say that? An' you a travelled man that's seen London an' the big world! Well, well"; James spat on his hands; "that's mighty curious. Sure, from all the writin' there is in one o' these papers, an' all the papers one sees in the shop windows in Bunn, I'd be thinkin' the lads were as thick on the streets as blackberries. To think o' that now; an' to think meself has seen one thing more in the world than you."

"Oh. So you've seen one of the lads, James?"

"Aw 'deed have I; a real live writin' man; ay, an' a cliver fellow—a cliver fellow. . . . Aw sure, aw sure." James pushed back his hat and broke into a guffaw. "*Haw, haw!* Will I iver forget that day, will I iver forget it? *Haw, haw!*"

"It's not fair, James," said I, turning on my pivot-leg, "and it's not manners, to keep the laugh to yourself."

"*Haw, haw,*" laughed James again. "Aw, troth, Mr. John, you'll have to forgive the laughin', for it's tickled I was. Whisht, an' I'll tell ye about it: from first to last I'll tell ye. . . . Now, keep them legs o' yours straight up there; an' let the hay out—let it out, or, be jamenty, you'll bring the ruck to a head as fast as if ye were made of linseed. Let it out; och, let it out, or we'll be the laughin' stock o' the meadow. An' shake a grain here, an' slap a lock down there, an' . . ."

Volubly and forcibly James gave his orders; meekly and cautiously I did his bidding; far out in the meadow, the Master stood eyeing my handiwork; the women leant on their rakes and stared and criticised; Hal

stopped the horses and flung me a cheer; Wee James, my rival in trade, shouted encouragement. . . . I took James Daly's advice, gave neither heed nor answer, and set myself to follow his story.

"The lad I'm to tell ye about," said James, in that dry, easy-going way of his, "was called Joseph at home, an' Joe be himself, an' Jop be ivery one else. Jop Hanly was his name in full; an' he was the son o' Hanly the town clerk of Clogheen beyont, him that was marrit three times, an' played the divil wi' three wives, an' was kilt at last be the kick of a horse. Well, Jop was a little scrunt of a chap, 'bout as big in his boots as Wee James over there, an' not half his weight, an' held his head as high as a jayraffe. He was a cliver boy was Jop; ay. He had a head on him as big as a two gallon pot; an' 'twas said that for three glasses o' whisky he'd talk bleather to ye in three kinds o' speech—his own an' two others; an' I mind hearin' him meself, the time I used to work over Clogheen way, makin' a speech as long as himself that had more onknowable words in it than'd sink a cot. The best o' schoolin' Jop had, the very best, for he was the ouldest son an' the father had pride in him; an' the man that learnt him knew as much as a priest. But for all his cliver-ness, you'd not much care for him. Naw. He was gabby, an' ontrustable; an' he'd drive a knife in ye fast as wink; an' if so be the Lord had sent him into the world wi' a tail on him surely it'd ha' been a pay-cock's. Vain? It's not the word. He was as big in his own eyes an' as conceited as five an' twenty tailors in their Sunday clothes.

“ Well, sir, Jop forby all else he had in that big head o’ his, was a great man at the writin’. Divil a word ye could set down but he’d string a rhyme to it; it came as easy to him to make a song, chune an’ all, as to drink buttermilk. An’, sure, to me own knowledge he had half the females in the country at his heels wi’ the butiful letters he’d be writin’ to them. Och, man, to see the handwrite of him; an’ to see the pen flyin’ in his fist! ’Twas wonderful. Where in the King’s name he got the big words from, or how in blazes he made them come one after another, like hailstones rattlin’ on the road, I can’t fathom. It was just like India meal pourin’ from a sack, as thick an’ as constant; an’ if one here wanted a letter sent to the papers, or if another there had somethin’ to send to a lawyer, or if a woman’d be after sayin’ a word to the childer in the States, ’twas always to Jop they’d go. An’ sure Jop was niver on-willin’. Ah no. All ye had to do was to plant a glass o’ whisky at his elbow, put a pen in his fist, tell him your wishes, an’ off he’d go like a house on fire with his curlycues an’ bendebuses.”

“ That’s a good word, James,” said I, from my place on the haycock.

“ It is that,” answered James, standing back to criticise; “ an’ that’s more’n I can say for your buildin’. Man alive, don’t be afeerd; it isn’t on sawdust you’ll be standin’. Move your feet, I tell ye, an’ spread the hay out. Wollop a lock here.” James smote the ruck here. “ Throw a lock there.” James smote the ruck there. “ Spread an armful along here. . . .

“ Well, sir,” James went on, after a while, “ there

comes an end to all things; an', in the course o' time, Jop gets tired o' firin' about Clogheen an' carryin' his big head here an' there. He wanted to see the world, says he. Clogheen was only a hole of a place, says he; what chance was there, says he, for a man with brains in a bit of a town like that? Naw, Jop'd see the world; so one fine mornin' off me gentleman sets wi' his traps, buys a ticket from the station master, shakes hands wi' one an' other, an' shouts Good-bye from the windy o' the twelve o'clock train. An' next thing we all hears is that Jop was scribblin' for some newspaper or other, takin' down cases in the law courts an' doin' the divil an' all in the streets o' Dublin.

"So far so good; but, lo an' behold ye, one day, here's the father wagglin' his coat-tails through the street, an' him burstin' his waistcoat wi' pride, an' a kind of a book—one of these affairs wi' pictures in them that the youngsters sell at the stations—in his fist, an' him goin' from shop to shop, showin' to one an' another a bit of a story that Jop was after writin'.

"'Look at that,' he'd say, an' bang the book on the counter; 'look at what my son Joseph Patrick's after writin'. There's somethin' to be proud of,' he'd say, an' march out, an' take the first he'd meet be the collar. 'Look at that,' he'd say; 'look at what my son Joseph Patrick'd be after writin'. Come away an' have a drink,' he'd say, 'till I read it to ye. Come away.' An' away he'd go; an' he'd read an' read, an' he'd drink an' drink; an' afore two hours, 'twas home he was carried speechless, shoutin' like blazes, an' wavin' the book about his head.

“ ’Twasn’t long afore all Clogheen got a squint at Jop’s bit o’ writin’; an’, faith, ’twasn’t long either afore people were squintin’ over their noses about it. Sure, ’twas a scandalous piece of impidence. I mind me hearin’ it read one night on the canal bridge as well as if ’twas only yisterday. Och, ’twas fair impidence. It was a kind of a story about courtin’ an’ kissin’, an’ a fallin’ out between a pair o’ fools in the middle, an’ a big fight at the end, an’ a man nearly kilt, an’ all the rest. But here’s where the impidence comes in. Ivery danged thing happened in a place that was only Clogheen under another name; an’ ivery danged mortal in it was someone, under another name, that we all knew as well as we knew the polis. Here was Father Mat just as big as life; here was Miss Kelly of the post office without a wart missin’ from her face; here was ould Burke of the hotel wi’ a nose on him like a red-hot blackthorn; here was Sure iveryone was there as plain, ay an’ twice as plain, as the clock on the town hall. An’ iveryone had their worst fut foremost; ay. ’Twasn’t all the nice things Jop said o’ them. Aw, no. ’Twas just the things we all used to laugh at.

“ Well, that was bad enough; but sure all of us that wasn’t made game of’d ha’ laughed at t’others an’ said nothin’, if so be Jop’d ha’ left Clogheen alone. ’Twas that angered us, an’ made us promise to keep a stone up our sleeves for Mr. Jop. Divil the like of it ye iver heard. You’d think ’twas Clogheen had kicked him out into the world, instead o’ it bein’ his own town, an’ the place he was born in, an’ it full of his friends. Clogheen

was a dirty little town built on the side of a hill, says Mr. Jop. Clogheen hadn't a stone in the sidewalks of it that wasn't cracked, says Mr. Jop, or a house that wasn't ready to fall, or a shop fit to sell rags. You'd find whisky runnin' down the gutters fair days, says Mr. Jop, an' ivery man-child in it as drunk as a fiddler, an' ivery second man whackin' his neighbour wi' a blackthorn. All day long, says Jop, you'll find the citizens (that was the word) keepin' the walls from fallin' by standin' against them, an' their wives clackin' in their tatters, and their childer pullin' the tails out o' the pigs in the gutters; an' the whiff o' turf smoke'd blind ye, an' you'd hear nothin' but the clink o' spoons in the tumblers all day long. That was how Jop talked, that was what he said o' the town he was born in—the little, pot-headed liar! Why, dang me," cried James, driving his fork viciously into a pile of hay, "'twas a wonder some o' us didn't take the train to Dublin an' kick his dirty carcass into the Liffey."

James paused to light his pipe; then stood back from the haycock, tilted his head and fell to indulging me with some critical and satirical remarks. Ah, I was gettin' on beautiful, so I was; divil take James, but it must be a turfstack I was after building; sorrow take his bones, but I had manufactured somethin' for all the world like a beehive running to seed. Couldn't I do as I was told? Dang it, was I afraid? "Hoi, Mike," shouted he, at last. "Come here, ye boy ye, an' help me to get this article into some kind o' shape. Come on, afore it grows into a church steeple."

Very meekly I heard; cautiously I sat me down. Be-

low me the haycock swayed and wobbled in response to the vigorous banging and plucking of Mike and James. My face was tingling and smarting; the sun smote me mercilessly; now and again Hal and Jem sent me a satiric cheer: in a while, out steps James again, seizes his fork and shouts for me to look alive up there.

“Things quieted down in Clogheen,” said James, “after a week or so; an’ in the course o’ time home comes Jop to see the ould father. We were waitin’ for that; och, we were. He was little changed to all appearance; his clothes maybe were a trifle smarter, an’ himself a bit brightened up, but he looked much the same. Here he goes an’ there he goes. ‘How are ye, me son?’ he says to this; an’, ‘Bully for you, me boy,’ he shouts to that. It was a drink here wi’ him, an’ two there; an’ withal one could see wi’ half an eye that he was dyin’ for us to tell him we’d read his story, an’ were powerful proud of it an’ him. But not we; och, not we! We just kept our tongues in our cheeks, listened to his talk an’ his romancin’ about the girls o’ Dublin; just listened to him, an’ said little, an’ got ready for him.

“At last, one day, up marches Billy Brody (him that was manager o’ the butter yard) to me bould Jop, axes him to have a drink, an’ over the tumblers gives out that some o’ the boys were anxious to have a spree wi’ Jop—just to meet him on the quiet, an’ crack a couple o’ bottles, an’ make a night of it, an’ show Jop how proud they all were of him. They’d kept things quiet up to this, says Billy, because—well, because they

wanted to give Jop a surprise, an' 'twas only to give him a chance to get ready a bit of a speech that Billy was tellin' him now. Would Jop come? asks Billy in a floostered kind o' way; would Jop honour the company by showin' himself among them? Because if he would, they'd be waitin' for him at ten o'clock that night in the barn over Mrs. Grogan's stables—'twas a poor place to bring him to, an' the hour was late; but sure they were anxious to keep to themselves an' from the noses o' the polis. Would Jop come? says Billy again. An' at the word Jop whacks the counter, an' lets fly a big oath, an' says be this an' be that but Billy was a brick, an' the boys were darlints, an' he'd come like a shot, an' dang their eyes but they'd have a night of it.

"Well, sir, ten o'clock comes an' there we are, about twenty or thirty of us, in Grogan's barn waitin' for Jop. 'Twas a biggish place at the back o' the town, close to the fields, wi' straw and hay along the walls, an' an odd sack of oats here an' there; an' sittin' about on sacks an' stools an' buckets were the lot of us, wi' Billy Brody in a big armchair out in the middle of the floor. An' there was no whisky, an' no sign of any; an' half the pipes among us weren't goin'; an' we said little; an' 'twas only to snuff the candles that stood here an' there in bottles that one of us'd stir a limb.

"After a while we hears the tramp, tramp o' Jop up the barn ladder; then his big head shows above the floor, then his shoulders . . . an' afore you'd wink, one o' the boys had the trap door closed behind him an' was sittin' on it.

"'Ho, ho, me sons,' says Jop, turnin' to us an' rubbin'

his hands; 'ho, ho, me sons, here we are again. Bully boys, bully boys——' An' next thing, two of the lads had Jop be the arms an' were twistin' them behind his back. That took him be surprise, an' for a second or so he stands dumfounded; then tries to twist round, an' shouts:

" 'What—what's this? Damme, what's this? Let me go, ye fools,' roars Jop. But the boys held him as if he was a child; an' Billy Brody shouts from the chair:

" 'Silence, Joseph Hanly.'

" 'Silence yourself, Billy Brody,' answers Jop, strugglin' an' fightin'. 'Let me go,' he roars, an' froths at the mouth; 'aw, dang ye, let me go!' But he might just as well ha' fought against a steam engine; an' five minutes after he was standin', pantin' like a mad dog an' as white as chalk, before Billy Brody an' the big arm-chair.

" There was a scuffle o' feet on the barn floor as we all gathered round, an', 'Silence,' roars Billy; then buttons his coat, clears his throat, an' lookin' at Jop as if he meant to bore holes in him wi' his eyes, he begins a speech. You'd be up in the clouds—an' the Lord knows," said James, throwing a note of deadliest sarcasm into his voice, "you'd hardly go there faster in a balloon nor you're goin'. Man alive, spread the hay *round* ye, an' don't be puttin' it under your feet like a hen goin' to lay an egg. Spread it"

"For the love of heaven, James," cried I, "shut your trapple and go on with your story."

"I'll not stand in this meadow," answered he,

“an’ see ye disgracin’ your breed wi’out speakin’ me mind.”

“You’ve spoken it, James,” said I in a voice of honey. “Now, like a good man, quit bullying me, and finish that grand story of yours.”

He looked dubiously at me; then turned away and began gathering some loose hay into a heap.

“I dunno whether you’re foolin’ me or not,” he said; “I misdoubt you’re blarneyin’; but no matter, I’ll finish what I had to say. . . . Where was I? Aw, yis. I was sayin’, less than two hours ago, that you’d be up in the clouds—an’ I say it again, mind ye, I say it again—you’d be up in the clouds if I started tellin’ ye all Billy Brody gave out in that speech of his. ’Twas as good a piece o’ work as iver came to me ears, an’ it was as good a piece o’ banter as iver Jop heard—that I’ll swear to. Not a word did Billy say about what was comin’. Och, not one. Not a word did he say about Jop’s story, or the way people took it in Clogheen. Och, not one. Not a threat did Billy make, not an oath did he put from him, not an angry word crossed his lips; what he said, dang me eyes, if I remember one syllable—an’ yit, somehow, ye had the feelin’ that you’d rather be trampin’ the treadmill nor hearin’ it in Jop’s shoes. Och, Billy had great gifts. It’s wonderful to think o’ the way he said nothin’ that night an’ cut Jop to the quick wi’ it. Ay, Billy had powerful gifts.”

“He certainly had,” said I, and wobbled on the neck of the haycock.

“At last,” James went on, quite unscathed of my irony, “out from his pocket Billy takes one o’ the books

Jop had his name in, wets his finger, turns over for a while, then holds the book in his two hands before Jop's face, an' says Billy:

" 'Joseph Hanly,' says he, 'do ye deny, or don't ye, that your hand wrote what ye see before ye?'

" 'Why o' course I wrote it,' answers Jop, smart an' quick like that; 'dang your eyes, can't ye see me name to it?'

" 'Very well,' says Billy, turnin' round the book, 'very well.' Then he takes a candle, crosses his legs, clears his throat, holds the book up to his face, an' says he:

" 'Joseph Hanly, did ye or did ye not write these words?' An' in his big bull's voice Billy reads what Jop had said about Clogheen bein' a dirty little town that was built on a hill, an' hadn't a sound stone in the sidewalks, an' all that. 'Did ye write those words, Joseph Hanly,' says Billy, lookin' at him; 'or did ye not?'

" 'Why, great King,' shouts Jop, 'can't ye see I did.'

" 'Off wi' his coat,' says Billy to the two boys that were grippin' his arms; an' at the word off they peel the coat from his back an' flings it on the floor.

" Billy crosses his legs again, an' goes on readin' what Jop wrote about the whisky runnin' down Clogheen street, an' the drunken men whackin' other, an' the women screechin' at their coat-tails. 'Did ye write them words, Joseph Hanly,' says Billy, at the end; 'or did ye not?'

" 'Ax me fut, Billy Knock-knee' (that bein' Billy's nickname, you'll know), answers Jop; an' at the word out roars Billy:

“ ‘ Off wi’ his waistcoat’; an’ off comes the waistcoat an’ is pitched on the floor.

“ Billy crosses his legs again, clears his throat, an’ falls to readin’ what Jop wrote in the story about the Clogheen men keepin’ the walls from fallin’, an’ their wives clackin’ in their tatters, an’ the childer pullin’ the tails off the pigs, an’ all that. ‘ Are them your words, Joseph Hanly,’ says Billy again; ‘ are them your words?’

“ ‘ Ax both me feet, Billy the Goat ’ (that bein’ another o’ Billy’s nicknames), shouts Jop; then makes a lep to get loose. ‘ Aw, be the piper,’ says he, ‘ but I’ll pay ye for this.’

“ ‘ Off wi’ his boots,’ roars Billy; an’ down Jop goes on his back an’ off comes the boots.”

James paused and looked up at me. “ Keep studdy, Mr. John,” he said softly and almost pleadingly. “ Just put a wee grain *tinderly* under your feet. . . . Keep your houghs stiff, now. . . . You’ll be off in a minute, now. . . . Don’t fall, aw, don’t fall.”

“ For heaven’s sake, James,” said I; “ never mind me, but go on with your story.”

“ I will—I will,” said James. “ Keep studdy now for a minute—I’ll soon be done. . . . Where was I? Yis; off comes Jop’s boots. Well, air, Billy reads another bit from the book an’ off comes Jop’s socks; an’ then he reads another piece an’ off comes his collar an’ . . . Now don’t be fallin’, Mr. John—och, don’t be fallin’.”

“ I’ll jump on your hat, James Daly,” shouted I from the ruck-head, “ if you don’t finish.”

"I will—I will Then up gets Billy from his chair, takes a sheet from one o' the boys an' wraps it round Jop, lights a penny dip an' sticks it in one hand, puts the book he'd been readin' from in th' other, shouts, 'Right about turn—quick march.' An' away to the trap door goes Jop, with a boy at each elbow an' him whimperin' like a babby. An' Billy first, an' the rest of us after him, down we go at Jop's heels, an' out through a back door into a lane that leads through the fields down to the canal.

"'Twas a fine warm night, I mind me, 'bout this season o' the year; an' there was no moon, an' no stars, an' no sign of a livin' soul. Just on our toes we went steppin' along as quiet as ghosts in a graveyard, wi' Jop an' the candle headin' the pro-cession an' ourselves followin' Billy Brody along the lane. An' sometimes a dog'd bark, an' once a haythen of an ass brayed at us, an' now an' then you'd hear Jop groanin' when his toes met a stone; but hardly a word passed between us, an' 'twasn't till we were well out into the fields that Jop gets leave from Billy an' the boys to open his lips wi' a word.

"' Ah, what are ye goin' to do wi' me?' shouts he, twistin' an' strugglin' inside the sheet. 'In God's name, what are ye goin' to do wi' me? Aw, Billy, Billy, let me go—let me go! Ah, I'll die dead! Ah, me poor feet! Ah, I'm cowl'd, I'm cowl'd! Ah, what are ye goin' to do?'

"' Wash some o' the Dublin impidence out o' ye below in the canal,' answers Billy. 'Silence in the ranks. . . . Quick march there in front wi' the prisoner.'

“Like that we went through the fields, an’ past the hedges an’ ditches, an’ across the meadows; an’ just as we had sight o’ the canal, all at once the shout was riz that the polis were comin’ an’, at the word, off we all slopes hilter-skilter through the fields, an’ leaves Jop shiverin’ there in the sheet, an’ roarin’ for mercy, an’ grippin’ his book an’ candle. . . .”

I was standing on the very top of the haycock. Out in the meadow, Jem and Annie Trotter and little Johnny Brady and the Master, stood looking towards me and laughing. Not far away, Mike Brady and Wee James stood prophesying my sudden downfall. From afar came Hal’s shout and skirl, and the hollow sound of his ironic applause. Just below stood James Daly, a hay-rope in his hand and in his eye a piteous light of dread.

“Now steady, me son,” pleaded James; “steady for just a minute.”

“Finish your story.”

“Now just another minute—just one.” James got ready a rope and prepared to fling it. “Steady now—steady”

“Finish your story,” I shouted. “Finish your dang story or I’ll toss the ruck.”

“Sure it’s finished. Sure——”

“Finish, I tell you. . . . What happened to Jop?”

“Sure the polis put him inside an overcoat an’ took him to the barrack—sure they were expectin’ us—sure Billy had it all arranged.” James flung me the rope. “Now take that, Mr. John——”

Boldly I stood erect on the haycock; sternly I looked down upon James.

“ Finish your story. . . . Never mind me. . . . Dang your caution. . . . What happened at the barracks! ”

“ Ah, the devil a much. . . . Sure Billy had it all arranged, I tell ye. An’ after a while a few of us took Jop’s clothes an’ a bottle o’ whisky round to the barrack kitchen, gives Jop a couple o’ glasses, brings out a pack o’ cards; an’ in half an hour all was arranged as peaceable as before a magistrate, an’ Jop was bangin’ the cards on a form before the fire. . . . Now aisy, Mr. John.” James flung me the second rope, fastened his end; then steadied the ruck with a rake. “ Now aisy, Mr. John; aisy, or you’ll toss it. Slither light, Mr. John; slither light. . . . Good—good, me son! ”

III

THE WEE TAY TABLE

I SLID down the side of the haycock, came thud upon the ground; then turned to view my handiwork. It was pitiable. This side bulged out like the belly of a slack jib, that side was flat as a wall; here was a great hollow spot, there an overhanging bump; already had the neck gone awry, and the top stood bobbing like the knob on a nightcap. It was woeful.

The Master came up, snorted in his sarcastic way, and walked off. Wee James came spying, sent a titter between his teeth and slouched away. “ Good man John,” came from Hal across the meadow, “ it’s the very

image of yourself, my son, only the hump on it's not big enough." "Lie down under it," shouted Jem, "an' when it falls it'll rid the world of ye." "Och, niver heed their pranks," said James Daly. "Sure it's not—sure it *might* ha' been worse."

Without a word I turned away, picked up a rake, and set out across the meadow.

Somewhere near the hill-hedge, with their arms bare, skirts tucked up, and faces peering from the depths of big sunbonnets, Anne Daly and Judy Brady were gathering the hay into long narrow rows; one raking this side of a row, the other that, and both sweetening toil with laughter and talk. Sometimes Anne leaned on her rake and chattered for a while; now Judy said a word or two and ended with a titter; again both bobbed heads and broke into merriment. I came nearer to them, got ready my rake, and began on a fresh row.

The talk was of a woman, of her and her absurdities. Anne was of opinion that it was she—Hannah, she called her—and the likes of her who spent their time in writing foolishness to these fashion papers. "The lazy trollop," said Anne; and, "Ay, indeed," assented Judy. Wasn't it just like a thing she'd do, asked Anne—she and her airs, and fooleries, and make-believes? Aw, but did Judy mind the last time they saw her in Bunn fair, all decked out like a draper's window with flowers and ribbons, and a wee bonnet cocked on her skull, and high-heeled boots, and the sorrow knows what? Aw, did Judy mind that? asked Anne, and laughed over her shoulder. Aw, faith, but Judy did mind it. The laughin'-stock o' the town she was. And did Judy mind

the tay-party she gave one time, and the wee table-cloth? Aw, heavenly hour, did Judy mind that affair?

"A table-cloth wi' a fringe to it, an' it not the size of an apron!" cried Anne.

"A calf-skin spread on the floor, an' John's ould hat stuffed wi' flowers!" cried Judy.

"'Wid ye like three lumps or four, Mrs. Flaherty?'" cried Anne. "Aw, dear heart, alive!"

"Then in comes big John," cried Judy, "in he comes—an'—an'—aw, Lord, Lord!"

And Judy bowed her head and laughed; and Anne bowed hers and laughed; and I, standing near them, and taken with the infection, must needs also lift my voice in a great guffaw.

Anne turned and looked at me.

"Ah, it's you, Mr. John," said she. "Sure I thought"—and she glanced towards the river—"that we left ye buildin' some kind of a ruck?"

Overlooking the sarcasm, I shouldered my rake and walked up between the rows.

"I've come to help you to laugh, Anne," said I. "What friend is this of yours and Judy's that you're stripping of her character?"

"Aw, divil a friend is it," said Anne, and went on raking; "an' divil a one ye iver heard of."

"How do you know that? Come, out with it."

"Ah, what's the use? Sure it's only foolishness."

"Well, tell me, then, about the calf-skin and the wee table-cloth."

"Aw, *that*," said Anne. "An' did ye hear us bleatherin' about that? Aw, now!" She laughed a little,

protested a little; after a while, started on a fresh row, and with oneself facing her and Judy treading on her heels, went on with the story.

"The lassie," said Anne, "we were talkin' about is a marrit woman—one Hannah Breen be name—an' she lives in a big house on the side of a hill over there towards the mountain. The husband's a farmer—an easy-goin', bull-voiced, good-hearted lump of a man, wi' a good word for ould Satan himself, an' a laugh always ready for iverything. But the wife, Hannah, isn't that kind. Aw, 'deed she isn't. 'Tisn't much good-speakin' or laughin' Hannah'll be doin'; 'tisn't herself'd get many cars to follow her funeral in these parts. Aw, no. 'Tisn't milkin' the cows, an' makin' the butter, an' washin' John's shirts, an' darnin' his socks, an' mendin' her own tatters, an' huntin' the chickens from the porridge-pot, Hannah was made for. Aw, no. It's a lady Hannah must be, a real live lady. It's step out o' bed at eight o'clock in the mornin', Hannah must do, an' slither down to her tay an' have it all in grandeur in the parlour; it's sittin' half the day she must be, readin' about the doin's o' the quality, an' the goin's on o' the world, an' squintin' at fashion-pictures, an' fillin' her mind wi' the height o' nonsense an' foolery; it's rise from the table in a tantrum she must do because John smacks his lips, an' ates his cabbage wi' his knife; it's worry the poor man out o' his wits she'd be after because he lies an' snores on the kitchen-table, an' smokes up to bed, an' won't shave more'n once a week, an' says he'd rather be hanged at once nor be choked up in a white shirt an' collar o' Sundays. An' for herself—aw, now,

it'd take me from this till sunset to tell ye about all her fooleries. If you'd only see her, Mr. John, stalkin' in through the chapel gates, wi' her skirts tucked up high enough to show the frillin' on her white petticoat, an' low enough to hide the big tear in it; an' black kid gloves on her fists; an' a bonnet on her wi'out a string to it; an' light shoes on her; an' a big hole in the heel o' her stockin'; and her nose in the air; an' her sniffin' at us all just as if we were the tenants at the butter-show an' herself My Lady come to prance before us all an' make herself agreeable for five minutes or so Aw, Lord, Lord," laughed Anne, "if ye could only see her, Mr. John. *Ho, ho, childer—ho, ho!*"

"*Te-he,*" tittered Judy Brady. "*Te-he!*"

"*Haw, haw,*" went I. "*Haw, haw!*"

"An' to see her steppin' down Bunn street," Anne went on, as we turned at the hedge and set our faces once more towards the river, "as if the town belonged to her—a ribbon flutterin' here, an' a buckle shinin' there, an' a feather danglin' another place—steppin' along wi' her butter-basket on her arm, an' big John draggin' at her heels, an' that look on her face you'd expect to see on the face o' the Queen o' France walkin' on a goold carpet, in goold slippers, to a goold throne! An' to see the airs of her when someone'd spake; an' to see the murderin' look on her when someone'd hint at a drop o' whisky for the good of her health; an' to hear the beautiful talk of her to the butter-buyers—that soft an' *po-lite*; an' to see her sittin' in the ould ramshackle of a cart goin' home, as straight in the back an' as stiff as a ramrod, an' her face set like a plaster

image, an' her niver lettin' her eye fall on John sittin' beside her an' him as drunk an' merry as a houseful o' fiddlers! Aw, sure," cried Anne, flinging up a hand, "aw, sure, it's past the power o' mortal tongue to tell about her."

"Yours, Anne, makes a good attempt at the telling, for all that," said I.

"Ach, I'm only bleatherin'," said Anne. "If ye only knew her—if ye only did."

"Well, tell me about the wee table-cloth," said I, "before your tongue gets tired."

"Ah, sure an' I will," replied she; "sure an' I'll try me hand at it."

The sun was dropping fast behind Emo hill; from the river a gentle breeze came creeping and sported with the crackling hay; across the meadow came the rattle of the mowing machine, and the snorts of Hal's horses, and the shouts of Hal himself. Back near the haycock I had so laboriously builded, Jem and Johnny Brady had discovered a bee's nest, and Jem was valorously storming it with a rake, and Johnny crowing with delight and clapping his hands; clear out against the eastern sky the figure of wee James stood straight on top of a ruck, hands on hips, feet close together as those of a drill sergeant: there was a great hum, a babblement, a noise of work and summer in the air; wherever one looked the hills were golden, and the fields smiling within their hedges, and the houses shining out in their whiteness.

"You'll be mindin'," said Anne, when she had loosened her bonnet strings and got her rake into swing,

“ that what I’m goin’ to tell ye is hearsay, an’ was told to meself, one day last year, be Jane Flaherty as we were comin’ along the road from Bunn market. Mebbe I’ll be tellin’ ye lies, mebbe I’ll not; if I do may the Lord forgive me an’ Jane; an’ if I don’t ye may thank Jane, for it’s her own words I’m goin’ to tell ye.

“ One day, then, sometime last summer, Hannah—beggin’ her ladyship’s pardon,” said Anne, a sudden note of scorn rasping in her voice, “ but I meant *Mrs. Breen*—decks herself out, ties on her bonnet, pulls on her kid gloves, an’ steps out through the hall door. Down she goes, over the ruts an’ the stones, along the lane, turns down the main road; after a while comes to the house o’ Mrs. Flaherty—herself that told me—crosses the street, an’ knocks *po-lite* on the door.

“ ‘ Aw, is Mrs. Flaherty at home, this fine day?’ axes Hannah when the door opens, an’ wee Nancy puts her tattered head between it an’ the post. ‘ Is Mrs. Flaherty at home?’ says she.

“ ‘ She is so,’ answers Nancy; ‘ but she’d be out at the well,’ says the wee crature.

“ ‘ I see,’ says Hannah, ‘ I see. Then, if you please, when she comes back,’ says she, ‘ would ye be kindly handin’ her that, wi’ Mrs. Breen’s compliments ’—an’ out of her pocket Hannah pulls a letter, gives it to Nancy, says good evenin’ to the wee mortal, gathers up her skirt, an’ steps off in her grandeur through the hens and ducks back to the road. Well, on she goes another piece an’ comes to the house of Mary Dolan; an’ there too, faith, she does the genteel an’ leaves another letter, an’ turns her feet for the house of Mrs.

Hogan; an' at Sally's she smiles, an' bobs her head, an' pulls another letter from her pocket, an' leaves it at the door; then twists on her heel, turns back home an' begins dustin' the parlour, an' arrangin' her trumpery, an' readin' bleather from the fashion papers.

"Very well, childer. Home Jane comes from the well, an' there's Nancy wi' the letter in her fist. 'What the devil's this?' says Jane, an' tears it open; an' there, lo an' behold ye, is a bit of a card—Jane swears 'twas a piece of a bandbox, but I'd be disbelievin' her—an' on it an invite to come an' have tay with me bould Hannah, on the next Wednesday evenin' at five o'clock *p.m.*—whativer in glory *p.m.* may be after meanin'; an' when Mary Dolan opens hers, there's the same invite; an' when Sally Hogan opens hers, out drops the same bit of a card on the floor; an' Sally laughs, an' Mary laughs, an' Jane laughs, an' the three o' them, what wi' the quareness o' the business, an' the curiosity of them to see Hannah at her capers, puts their heads together, an' laughs again, an' settles it that sorrow take them but go they'll go. An' go they did. Aw, yis. . . . Aw, Lord, Lord," laughed Anne, turning up her eyes. "Lord, Lord!"

"Aw, childer, dear," giggled Judy, with a heaving of her narrow shoulders. "Aw, go they did!"

"Good girl, Anne," said I, and slapped my leg; "my roarin' girl! Aw, an' go they did, Judy—go they did."

"Well, hearts alive," Anne went on, "Wednesday evenin' comes at last; an' sharp to five o'clock up me brave Jane Flaherty steps along the lane, crosses the yard, an' mindin' her manners, knocks twice on Han-

nah's back door—then turns, an' wi' the dog yelpin' at her, an' the gander hissin' like a wet stick on a fire, waits like a beggarwoman on the step. But divil a one comes to the door; aw, not a one. An' sorrow a soul buded inside; aw, not a soul. So round turns Jane, lifts her fist again, hits the door three thunderin' bangs, an' looks another while at the gander. Not a budge in the door, not a move inside; so Jane, not to be done out of her tay, lifts the latch—an', sure as the sun was shinin', but the bolt was shot inside. 'Well, dang me,' says Jane, an' hits the door a kick, 'but this is a fine way to treat company,' says she, an' rattles the latch, an' shakes it. At last, in the divil of a temper, spits on the step, whips up her skirt, an' cursin' Hannah high up an' low down, starts for home.

"She got as far as the bend in the lane, an' there meets Mary Dolan.

"'What's up?' axes Mary. 'What's floostered ye, Jane Flaherty? Aren't ye goin' to have your tay, me dear?' says Mary.

"'Aw, may the first sup she swallows choke the breath in her,' shouts Jane, an' goes on to tell her story; an' before she'd said ten words, up comes Sally Hogan.

"'Am I too late?' says Sally, 'or am I too early?' says she; 'or what in glory ails the two o' ye?'

"'Ails?' shouts Jane. 'Ye may well say that, Sally Hogan. Ye may turn on your heel,' says she, an' begins her story again; an' before she was half through it Sally laughs out, and takes Jane by the arm, an' starts back to the house.

“ ‘Come away,’ says she; ‘come away an’ have your tay, Jane; sure, ye don’t know Hannah yet.’

“ So back the three goes—but not through the yard. Aw, no. ’Twas through the wee green gate, an’ down the walk, an’ slap up to the hall door Sally takes them; an’ sure enough the first dab on the knocker brings a fut on the flags inside, an’ there’s Kitty, the servant-girl, in her boots an’ her stockin’s, an’ her Sunday dress, an’ a white apron on her, standin’ before them.

“ ‘Aw, an’ is that you, Kitty Malone,’ says Sally. ‘An’ how’s yourself, Kitty, me dear? An’ wid Mrs. Breen be inside?’ says she.

“ ‘She is so, Mrs. Hogan,’ answers Kitty, an’ bobs a kind of curtsy. ‘Wid ye all be steppin’ in, please?’

“ ‘Aw, the Lord’s sake,’ gasps Sally on the door step, at all this grandeur; ‘the Lord’s sake,’ says she, an’ steps into the hall; an’ in steps Mary Dolan, an’ in steps Jane Flaherty, an’ away the three o’ them goes at Kitty’s heels up to the parlour. . . . Aw, heavenly hour,” cried Anne, and turned up her eyes. “ *Ho, ho!* ”

“ *Te-he,*” giggled Judy, and hoisted her shoulders. *Te-he!* ”

“ *Haw, haw,*” laughed I. “ Aw, Judy, dear. *Haw, haw!* ”

“ Well, dears,” Anne went on, “ in the three walks, bonnets an’ all, an’ sits them down along the wall on three chairs, an’ watches Kitty close the door; then looks at other in a puzzled kind o’ way, an’ after that, without openin’ a lip, casts their eyes about the room. ’Twas the funniest kind of a place, Jane allowed, that iver she

dropped eyes on. There was a sheep-skin, lyin' woolly side up, in front o' the fireplace, an' a calf-skin near the windy——"

"Ay, a calf-skin," said Judy Brady. "*Te-he!*"

"—— an' a dog's skin over be the table, an' the floor was painted brown about three fut all round the walls. There was pieces o' windy curtain over the backs o' the chairs; there was a big fern growin' in an ould drain-pipe in the corner; there was an ould straw hat o' John's stuffed full o' flowers an' it hangin' on the wall, an' here an' there, all round it an' beside it were picters cut from the papers an' then tacked on the plaster. Ye could hardly see the mantelshelf, Jane allowed, for all the trumpery was piled on it, *dinglum-danglums* of glass an' chaney, an' shells from the say, an' a sampler stuck in a frame, an' in the middle of all a picter of Hannah herself got up in all her finery. An' there was books, an' papers, an' fal-lals, an' the sorrow knows what, lyin' about; an' standin' against the wall, facin' the windy, was a wee table, wi' a cloth on it about the size of an apron, an' it wi' a fringe on it, no less, an' it spread skew-wise an' lookin' for all the world like a white ace o' diamonds; an' on the cloth was a tray wi' cups an' saucers, an' sugar an' milk, an' as much bread an' butter, cut as thin as glass, as you'd give a sick child for its supper. . . . Aw, heavenly hour," cried Anne, "heavenly hour!"

"Aw, childer, dear," cried Judy. "*Te-he!*"

"Aw, woman alive," said I. "Aw, Judy, dear. *Haw, haw!*"

"Well, childer, the three looks at all, an' looks at

each other, an' shifts on their chairs, an' looks at each other again; an' says Mary Dolan at last:

“ ‘ We're in clover, me dears,' says she, ' judgin' be the spread beyont '—and she nods at the wee table.

“ ‘ Ah, that'll do for a start,' says Sally Hogan; ' but where in glory are we all to put our legs under that wee table? Sure it'll be an ojus squeeze.'

“ ‘ It will so,' says Jane Flaherty, ' it will so. But isn't it powerful quare o' Hannah to keep us sittin' here so long in our bonnets an' shawls, an' us dreepin' wi' the heat?'

“ ‘ It's the quarest hole I iver was put in,' says Mary Dolan; ' an' if this is grandeur, give me the ould kitchen at home wi' me feet on the hearth an' me tay on a chair. . . . *Phew,*' says Mary, an' squints round at the windy, '*phew,* but it's flamin' hot! Aw,' says she, an' makes a dart from her chair, ' dang me, but I'll burst if I don't get a mouthful o' fresh air.' An' just as she had her hand on the sash to lift it, the door opens an' in steps me darlint Hannah.

“ ‘ Good evenin', ladies all,' says Hannah, marchin' in wi' some kind of a calico affair, made like a shroud wi' frills on it, hangin' on her, ' Good evenin', ladies,' says she, an' wi' her elbow cocked up in the air as if she was strivin' to scrape it against the ceilin', goes from one to another an' shakes hands. ' It's a very pleasant afternoon ' (them was the words), says she, makin' for a chair beside the wee table; ' an' I'm very pleased to see ye all,' says she.

“ ‘ Aw, an' the same here,' says Mary Dolan in her free way, ' the same here; an' ojus nice ye look in that

sack of a calico dress, so ye do,' says Mary, wi' a wink at Jane Flaherty. 'But it's meself'd feel obliged to ye if so be you'd open the windy an' give us a mouthful o' fresh air,' says Mary.

"An' Hannah sits down in her shroud wi' the frills on it, an' smiles, an' says she, 'I'm rather delicate' (them were the words) 'this afternoon, Mrs. Dolan, an' afeerd o' catchin' cold; an', forby that,' says she, 'the dust is so injurious for the parlour.'

"'Aw, just so,' answers Mary, 'just so. Sure, I wouldn't for worlds have ye spoil your parlour for the likes of us. But I'll ax your leave, Mrs. Breen, seein' ye don't ax me yourself, to give me own health a chance,' says she, 'be throwin' this big shawl off me shoulders.'

"'But it's *afternoon tay*, Mrs. Dolan,' answers Hannah, in her cool way; 'an' it's not fashionable at afternoon tay for ladies to remove—'

"'Then *afternoon tay* be danged,' says Mary, an' throws the shawl off her across the back of her chair; 'an' it's meself'll not swelter for all the fashions in the world,' says she, an' pushes her bonnet back an' lets it hang be the strings down her back. 'Aw, that's great,' says she, wi' a big sigh; an' at that off goes Jane's shawl an' bonnet, an' off goes Sally's; an' there the three o' them sits, wi' Hannah lookin' at them as disgusted as as ass at a field of thistles over a gate. . . . Aw, glory be," cried Anne. "Ho, ho!"

"Aw, me bould Anne," cried Judy; "me brave girl. *Te-he!*"

"Good for you, Anne," said I. "Aw, me brave Judy. *Haw, haw!*"

“ Well, dears, Hannah sits her down, puts her elbow on a corner o’ the ace o’ diamonds, rests her cheek on her hand, an’ goes on talkin’ about this an’ that. She hoped Mrs. Flaherty, an’ Mrs. Dolan, an’ Mrs. Hogan were well an’ prosperous; she hoped the crops were turnin’ out well; she hoped all the childer were in the best o’ good health. Aw, like the Queen o’ Connaught, Hannah talked, an’ smiled, an’ aired herself an’ her beautiful English, but sorrow a move did she make to shift her elbow off the wee table-cloth, an’ divil a sign or smell o’ tay was there to be seen. Aw, not a one. Ten minutes went, an’ twenty, an’ half an hour; an’ at that, up Mary Dolan stretches her arms, gives a powerful big yawn, an’ says she, ‘ Och, dear Lord,’ says she, ‘ dear Lord, but the throat’s dry in me! Och, och,’ says she—an’ with the hint up gets Hannah in her frilled shroud, crosses the calf-skin, opens the door, an’ calls for Kitty. ‘ Yis, Mrs. Breen,’ answers Kitty from the kitchen. ‘ Serve tay,’ calls Hannah; then closes the door an’ steps back to her chair by the wee table.

“ In about ten minutes, here comes me darlint Kitty, boots an’ stockin’s an’ all; carries the taypot on a plate over to the table, an’ plants it down slap in the middle o’ the ace o’ diamonds. Up jumps Hannah wi’ a bounce.

“ ‘ What are ye doin’, Kitty?’ says she, with a snap of her jaw, an’ lifts the taypot, an’ glares at the black ring it had made on her brand new cloth. ‘ D’ye see what you’ve done?’ says she, lookin’ as black in the eyes as the bottom o’ the taypot. ‘ Stand back,’ says she, pointin’ her finger, ‘ stand back an’ mend your manners, ye ignerant little baggage ye!’

“ ‘Yis, ma’am,’ answers Kitty, an’ stands back; then turns her head, when she gets to the calf-skin, an’ winks at the three sittin’ by the wall; an’ out Mary Dolan bursts into a splutter of a laugh.

“ ‘Aw, Lord,’ says Mary, an’ holds her ribs; ‘aw, dear Lord,’ says she. But Hannah, standin’ pourin’ the tay into the wee cups, just kept her face as straight as if Mary was a dummy, an’ in a minute she turns round to Kitty.

“ ‘Hand the cups to the ladies,’ says she, an’ sits her down.

“ Well, childer dear, Kitty steps from the calf-skin, lifts two cups an’ saucers from the tray, carries them across the floor, an’ offers one to Jane Flaherty wi’ this hand, an’ t’other to Sally Hogan wi’ that hand. An’ Sally looks at the cup, an’ then at Kitty; an’ Jane looks at Kitty, an’ then at the cup, an’ says Sally:

“ ‘Is it take it from ye you’d have me do, Kitty Malone?’ says she.

“ ‘It is so,’ answers Kitty wi’ a grin.

“ ‘An’ where in glory wid ye have me put it, Kitty Malone?’ asks Sally, an’ looks here an’ there. ‘Sure—sure there’s no table next or near me,’ says she.

“ ‘It’s *afternoon tay*, Mrs. Hogan,’ says Hannah across the floor; ‘an’ at afternoon tay, tables aren’t fashionable,’ says she, an’ grins to herself.

“ ‘Well, thank God, Hannah Breen,’ says Mary Dolan, ‘that *afternoon tay*, as ye call it, has only come *my* way once in me life. Take the cup in your fist, Sally Hogan,’ says Mary, ‘an’ if ye break it, bad luck go with it, an’ if ye don’t, you’ve been a lady for once in your

life; an' when you're done, stick it there on the floor. I'm obliged to ye, Kitty Malone,' says Mary again, an' takes a cup; 'an' if so be I choke meself wi' the full o' this thimble wi' a handle on it,' says Mary, an' squints at the cup, 'you'll do me the favour to tell Pat I died a fool. An' if such things go well wi' *afternoon tay*, Kitty, *agra*, I'd trouble ye for a look at a spoon.' . . . Aw, me bould Mary," cried Anne, and laughed in her glee. "Ye were the girl for Hannah, so ye were. *Ho, ho!*"

"Aw, 'deed ay," cried Judy, and tittered most boisterously. "Aw, me brave Hannah. *Tc-he!*"

"Good for you, Mary Dolan," cried I; "and good for you, Anne, my girl. *Haw, haw!*"

"Then begins the fun, me dears. First of all, Sally Hogan in tryin' to lift a bit o' bread an' butter from a plate that Kitty held before her, must spill her tay over her lap an' start screechin' that she was kilt. Then Mary Dolan must finish her cup at a gulp, an' forgettin' it was in Hannah's parlour she was at afternoon tay, an' not at home in the kitchen, must give the dregs a swirl an' sling them over her shoulder against the wall. Then Sally Hogan again, in tryin' to keep back a laugh at the tay-leaves on the wall, an' the glare of Hannah across at them, must get a crumb in her throat an' bring the whole room to thump her on the back. Then Jane Flaherty gets a second cup wi' no sugar in it, an' makes a face like a monkey's, an' gives a big splutter, an' sets Kitty Malone off into a fit o' laughin'; an' Kitty sets Jane off, an' Jane sets Mary off, an' Mary sets Sally off; an' there sits Hannah, in her calico shroud, beside the ace o' diamonds, wi' a face on her like a child cuttin' its

teeth, an' her arm out, an' her shoutin' for Kitty to take herself out o' the room. An' in the middle o' the whole hubbub the door opens, an' in tramps big John in his dirty boots, wi' his shirt-sleeves turned up, an' hay-ropes round his legs, an' his hat on the back o' his head, an' his pipe in his mouth—in steps John an' stands lookin' at them all.

“ ‘Ho, ho,’ roars John, an' marches across the calf-skin. ‘What have we here? A tay party,’ says he, ‘as I’m a livin’ sinner—an’ me not to know a thing about it! Well, better late nor niver,’ says he, then turns an’ looks at Hannah. ‘Aw, how d’ye do, Mrs. Breen?’ says he wi’ a laugh. ‘I hope I see ye well in your regimentals. An’ how the blazes are the rest o’ ye, me girls?’ says he to the three along the wall. ‘I’m glad to see ye all so hearty an’ merry, so I am. But what in glory are ye all doin’ over there, away from the table? Why don’t ye sit over an’ have your tay like Christians?’ says he. ‘Come over, girls—come over this mortal minute,’ says John, ‘an’ I’ll have a cup wi’ ye meself, so I will.’

“ Then Hannah rises in her calico shroud.

“ ‘John,’ says she, ‘it’s *afternoon tay* it’ll be, an’ tables——’

“ ‘Aw, sit ye down, Hannah,’ shouts John, ‘sit ye down, woman, an’ be like another for once in a way.’

“ ‘John,’ says Hannah again, an’ looks knives an’ forks at him, ‘where’s your manners the day?’

“ ‘Aw, manners be danged,’ roars John, an’ throws his hat into the corner; ‘give us a cup o’ tay an’ quit your nonsense. Come on, girls,’ says he to the women,

'come over an' have a cup in comfort wi' me here at the table.'

"'John,' says Hannah again, 'ye can't sit at this table; it's—it's too small,' says she.

"'Then pull it out from the wall,' roars John, 'pull it out an' let us get round it. Come on,' says he, an' grips an end o' the table, 'give it a lift across the floor.'

"'No, no, John,' shouts Hannah, an' grips t'other end to keep it from goin'; 'ye mustn't, John!'

"'Out wi' it,' roars John again.

"'No, no,' shouts Hannah, 'ye can't—aw, ye can't—aw, ye mustn't—no, no, John!'

"'Aw, to glory wi' you an' it,' shouts John. 'Here, let me at it meself!'

"An' the next minute Hannah was screechin' in her shroud; an' there was a clatter o' crockery, like as if a bull had gone slap at a dresser; an' John was standin' like as if he was shot, in the middle of the floor; an' lyin' at his feet was the wee table, an' the ace of diamonds, an' the whole o' Hannah's cups an' saucers, an' the taypot, an' all, in a thousand pieces Aw, heart alive, heart alive!"

Anne leant upon her rake and bowed head in laughter. Two minutes grace she had; then said I:

"What had happened, Anne?"

She looked at me. "Happened? Sure the table was only an ould dressin'-table, an' had only three legs, an' was propped wi' the lame side against the wall; an' when John put it down in the middle of the floor—Aw, now," cried Anne, "that's enough, that's enough. . . . Aw, me sides—me sides. *Ho, ho!*"

“Aw, me sides—me sides,” cried Judy, shaking below her big sunbonnet. “*Te-he!*”

“Aw, women alive,” cried I, sinking back on the hay. “*Haw, haw!*”

From the bank of the river came a great shout; then a skirl from Hal; then a burst of laughter from the men, and a cry from Jem: “Look, John—look, John, quick.”

I turned and looked, and there along the meadow lay spread the haycock which, at such a cost, I had laboriously builded.

“Good man, John,” shouted Hal from the mowing-machine. “Is that the way they build rucks in London?”

I refrained from answering; but Anne Daly, taking pity upon me, stooped and said softly: “It just wanted one thing, Mr. John; just one thing.”

“What was that, Anne?”

“Like Hannah’s tay-table—’twas lame of a leg.”



THE REAPERS





I

WHAT a magician is my Lord the sun. He hides his face and our hearts sadden, life is drear and the broad earth unkindly; out he comes with golden smile and gone are mists and gloom, our blood dances, life runs merrily, on hill and pasture behold all things become new—fields shining, hedges gleaming, joy and hope going pleasantly in all the valleys. He smiles, we laugh and caper; he frowns, we cower and shiver; from the grim depths of winter we turn weary eyes upon the narrow path of his journeyings, on the glorious heights of summer-time stand shouting at the triumph of his march: so from day to day he plays with us, controls us, pipes to and orders the dance of our little lives.

We danced to many a tune, one remembers, that summer of our coming again to Emo. Always there is my Lord a king; just then he was no less than a tyrant. He smote us, fawned upon us, sported with us, enslaved us, made us kneel beseeching his pity and scattered bountifully the treasures of his wealth; was fitful, treacherous, cruel, at last hid himself darkly within his cloak of grey and left us to the terrors of a pitiless sky.

It was another deluge. Rain and wind, storm and flood, blight and mist, we had them all in plenty and for many a day. Job himself set down within the circle of those stricken hills must surely ere long have cursed

God and died. It was pitiful. There seemed no hope. Those days of the hay-making in August, so tardy in coming and swift in going, so far away now and fondly remembered, were the last for many a week of the magician's favour. There lay the river meadow—there still—soaked to its depths, Thrasna river brimming its edge, the face of it strewn with sodden haycocks, and flattened laps, and whole acres of meadow lying rotten in the swath; see the grass famishing on the hills, the turf swimming in the heather, the potatoes rotting in the uplands, the corn flat and tangled in the valleys. The roads were swamps, the fields sour; cattle died by scores; everywhere was sickness and weariness: one could do nothing but stand at the doors, or behind rattling windows, and looking up through the murk, pray God to stay the terrors of His hand.

Then, one day, late it was in the royal month of September, behold the sun out, the sky clear and the land smiling once more. In a twinkle it all came about, just with a shift of the wind and the breaking of another day; and just in a twinkle, you might say, there were we with our backs to all those miserable yesterdays and our faces flushed with the glory of a harvest morning.

It was great—great to be out once more, with the earth firm to the foot and the sun warm in the blood, glorious to see life in the fields again, and the shadows on the mountain, and the gossamer clouds go skimming the great arch of the sky. Rain. Had it ever rained? Gloom. Could it ever be gloomy again? Surely all that back there, all that terrifying time, had never been, could never be on such a glorious earth? Surely. . . .

Wait. Think of the meadows lying soaked, thousands of acres of them lying waste between the hills. See the potato fields stretched out in their blackness, smitten already by the grim hand of famine. See the empty haggards, empty turf sheds, flaunting weeds, bedraggled crops; oh, a glorious earth it is surely that all day long sends up its incense of mist and rottenness towards the face of my Lord the sun.

At the foot of Emo hill, between it and Rhamus, was a piece of reclaimed bog-land, some four or five acres in all, sown that year with wheat. It was a kindly field, the best in those parts, and for long enough its crop had been the envy of a country-side: now it lay in the sunshine, tangled, rank, scarce worth the gathering. In places it stood tall as a rake, in places lay flat and sodden; weeds and thistles sprang abundantly; and, as James Daly remarked, if you climbed a stalk you wouldn't find in a month of Sundays what grain would feed a sparrow. Still straw makes good thatch, said Mike Brady, and women make cheap labour, and what the Almighty sends we'd better take; so, one morning, a week of sunshine having done somewhat in the way of ripening and drying, over the heather came Anne the wife of James, and Judy the wife of Mike, with their sickles on their shoulders, and bent their backs to the reaping.

The arrangement was this. Each woman was to reap half the field, payment to be made by the full-sized stook; and that there might be no inequality in the conditions of work, it was further agreed between themselves, at the instance of James the knowing be it said,

that each should take alternate lands (these being the long wide ridges on which the crop stood); Anne all the odd lands, Judy all the even, the one remaining at the finish, if there were one, to be shared between them. Furthermore, said Anne, tucking up her skirt:

“It'd be wise mebbe for the two of us to do our own tyin' and stookin'. Who knows,” said Anne, looking over Judy's head towards Rhamus hill, “who knows but one of us mebbe might reap more than t'other; an' then”

There was no need for Anne to say further. Judy understood perfectly. Right well she knew what Anne meant and how Anne was thinking; but, thought Judy, with a tightening of her thin lips and a hardening of her pinched face, please God it wasn't herself would do less than Anne Daly that blessed day. No. Ah, she knew well how Anne was thinking. It was a way she had; a fashion of looking down on people, of imagining that the only woman of account in the town-land went by the name of Daly; ay, that was Anne's way. “Maybe one of us would do more than t'other,” said she. Ah, yes. But wait, thought Judy, and hook on shoulder stood twisting the band of her first sheaf; maybe 'twas another word would be on Anne's tongue before night-fall. Just wait! And scrunch went Judy's hook through the golden wheat.

If Judy did no less than Anne in the first hour or two of that first morning of the reaping, assuredly that was not Anne Daly's fault. A child could see that Anne was holding herself back; it needed no more than a glance of Anne's knowing eyes to see that Judy was

striving her hardest. And clearly she did see it, did Anne Daly; and smiled pityingly at the seeing.

"The poor crature," said Anne within herself, fingers busy with a band and eyes following Judy as from right to left she came cutting fiercely across her land; "the poor deludhered crature. Sure if I only tried it's two sheaves to her one I'd reap. . . . An' here's her strivin' wi' me, her with about as much strength in her bones as a sick goat! . . . Still she's a neighbour—an' her company's better nor lonesomeness—an' strivin's only child's diversion—an' God knows, anyway, I pity the poor donny crature an' I mustn't be hard on her, so I mustn't. Ah, no; I mustn't be hard on her," said Anne, and leisurely, with that finished ease which comes of ample strength and skill, gathered a sheaf within its band, bound and cast it from her knee; "ah, no. Sure it's best to be neighbourly, so it is. Ay. Tell me, Judy," she said aloud, "did iver ye see the like how things alter wi' the weather? Sure it's wonderful. Here, last week or so, were we with the hearts washed out of us, an' the sky above us as gloomy lookin' as a hearse at a funeral; an' now"—Anne stood upright, rested hands on hips, and slowly fed her eyes on the sun-bright countryside—"now you'd think a'most there hadn't been a drop o' rain since Noah's ark. Ay, ye would. Niver would ye think to look at things that the turfs yonder in mud, an' the praties lyin' rottin' over there, an' the hay soakin' beyont along the river. Ah, no. It's powerful deceivin' so it is. Sure the sun can do what it likes with iverything. Ay, it can. An' the different kind o' feel that comes over oneself—a new

kind o' feel like as if you'd stepped bang out of a sick bed. . . ." Anne paused, sighed contentedly, bent to work. "Aw, I don't know what it is," said she; "I dunno; but it's powerful pleasant anyway. Ay, it is. Och, but that sun's powerful comfortin' to the back," said Anne; then, Judy not responding, swiftly made haste to regain the sheaf or two she had lost in the minutes of her sky-gazing.

For a while the women worked in silence, slowly and laboriously cutting their way up the tangled lands; Judy never pausing, never looking up even, going doggedly on; Anne taking things leisurely, looking at the hills as she stood twisting a band, resting for a minute to look towards home, following the progress of a cart along the road or of the Master across the fields, sometimes humming a tune or lilting an air, ever and again watching Judy from the corner of her eye and smiling at the foolishness of the body. To think of her striving like that, thought Anne; and what was worse, sulking as she strove. Not a word had passed her lips for a whole hour. Her face was as hard as the door-post, her lips as tight together as tuppence in a rag. What ailed the woman, at all, at all? Odious sudden the change had come over her. She had been civil enough at first. Nothing Anne knew of had come to give her offence—nothing except the word or two, spoken in pure good will and just as a matter of caution, that had passed about the binding and stooking. Yet here was the woman striving and sulking, and never lifting her head! Was she sick, or vexed, or what? Was the work too much for her, or the sun too hot? Was she fretting? Ah,

what in glory ailed the woman? thought Anne; then turned and spoke:

"Judy. I say, Judy. What in sorrows' name ails ye?" Judy never answered. "Are ye frettin', or sick, or what?" Anne went on, hands on knees and her eyes on Judy. "Is the work troublin' ye?" Still no word. "Is there anything I've done to ye, then?" Anne continued. "Or is there anything I'd be able to do for ye?"

Judy looked round.

"Ye can do nothin'," said she. "There's nothin' ailin' me. I wouldn't have ye—" Judy paused, wiped her brow; went on reaping.

"Finish the word," said Anne, still with her face towards Judy and hands on her knees. "Woman dear, speak out. Is it afeerd you'd be?"

Afraid! Round flashed Judy.

"Afeerd?" cried she. "An' of what, may I ax? Is it of you—of you, Anne Daly? Arrah, don't think it! What about ye! What about ye, I say? Amn't I as good as you—ay, an' better—any day? Arrah, what about ye. You an' your airs an' your condescension!"

Anne rose to her full height and, arms straight down, face slowly changing, stood looking upon Judy.

"Keep your pity," cried Judy, shrilly and bitterly; "keep your pity for them that want it. I'm as good as you, Anne Daly—as good a woman," cried Judy, pointing her hook; "as good a worker, an' as good a reaper. Ye hear me," shrilled Judy, shooting out an arm; "for all your boastin' as good a reaper."

Just a minute Anne stood face to face with Judy;

then, quickly, her head went back and she laughed merrily. "Aw, Lord sees," said Anne. "Lord sees. Listen to that now. Think of it. Childer dear. 'I'm as good as you,' says she; 'as good a woman,' says Judy; 'an' as good a reaper.' That's the word is it; an' *that's* the mystery. Ah, to be sure." She took a step forward. "Tell me, Judy Brady: are ye meanin' this, or is it only a piece o' your foolery?"

"Foolery an' me are bad friends," answered Judy; "an' what I don't mean I don't say."

"Don't ye, faith?" Again Anne laughed. "I'm obliged to ye for the knowledge. Sure one lives an' learns, as the sayin' is. . . . But look ye here, Judy, *agra*; there's things in this world that's worth the provin'. If you're as good a woman as meself then I'm sorry to be alive, an' that's all I'll say about that; but about the reapin'"—Anne raised her hook, spat on its handle and twirled it—"I'd like to try ye." She stooped, hook ready and eyes on Judy. "Are ye ready, Mrs. Brady?"

What could Judy do? In her heart she knew herself to be a fool; knew that she had said too much, that against Anne she had no chance of success, that only heart-break and weariness might come of her foolishness. Still . . . still . . . still . . .

"I'm ready," said Judy.

And the sickles flashed.

II

It was a boast with James Daly, usually on those rare occasions when Bunn whisky had his tongue in thrall, that Anne, his wife, was the finest specimen of womankind in all Fermanagh; the best favoured and the most gifted, as good with tongue as with head and better with hands than with either. That this was James' real opinion we may take as gospel, that it was Anne's own opinion is easy of belief, that it must have been yours also, had it been your chance to see her that first day of our Eneo harvesting, is not to be doubted.

She made a fine figure of a woman, did Anne; big, robust, comely; round and rosy of cheek, bright and clear of eye, arm strong and shapely, neck full and firm; none of your sickly nymphs of parlour or pavement, but a wholesome daughter of the hills, a woman of parts, character, substance, sharp of tongue, quick in thought and action, a better man, said James her husband (and more than James maybe), in turf-bog or meadow than half the whiskers of the countryside. Certainly she was no longer young, nor lithe, and time had taken to himself much of her once notorious prowess of foot and arm; but, even in face of these calamities, James' boast of her went still unchallenged, and still might he affirm without fear of cavil that she and a sickle were worth not less than half a reaping-machine.

Perhaps, that morning—if one adopts for the occasion a marital, and glorified, system of reckoning—Anne was worth more than half; for was she not on her mettle

and braced for worthy deeds? She meant to let people see, to make the sheaves fly, to do a day's work, noise of which should ring about the countryside, setting folk talking and wondering round many a hearth. Her reputation was at stake. Judy Brady had challenged her. "I'm as good a woman, and as good a reaper"; that was the word. Was she? Judy Brady, little wizened Judy Brady? She! Oh, by the powers, but she'd show her; and not her only—no, not her, for she scorned the striving with her—but all the others, all the knowing ones who were jealous of her and had the word that her best day was past. Past! She'd show them. Why, she felt strong as a horse. What if the sun was hot, and the wheat tangled, and the thistles big as black-thorns; what of these, thought Anne, and arms bare, skirt tucked high about her waist, bodice-neck open and sunbonnet tied loosely about her chin—what of these, thought Anne, and from left to right and right to left went tumbling the golden wheat.

The harder the work the greater the glory; the hotter the sun the better the day; come down, said Anne in the pride of her strength and skill: and down came the rustling wheat. Slowly and steadily her feet went dragging through the stubble, quick and constantly her hook flashed in and out; just a cut for the band, just four or five big handfuls, then a turn of the hook over her shoulder, a tug and a twist—and there lay the sheaf at her feet. And there was no hurry, no unseemly fluster resulting in long stubble, scattered straws, and maybe a gashed wrist: oh, not at all. That was not Anne Daly's way. Quick and sure was the word with her.

No need was there to fret over trifles, or to stand blind whilst she twisted and tied the bands, or to be deaf to all the sounds of work and life that came flowing over the hills; no need on earth was there to make work a toil, or to feel lonesome, or to go silent of song and lilt adown the stubble. She had worked and striven before, knew well the arts and rules of the game. Quick and sure was the word, heart merry, body willing, face to work and back to the foe—the foe toiling there far behind, the foe that not once these hours past had she so much as deigned to look back upon. “Aw, poor Judy; poor little Judy Brady!”

Ah, poor Judy; poor little Judy Brady, indeed. Hers was a hard fate that day. Already, and not once but many times, had she gathered bitter fruit of her foolishness. She was far behind, very far, and that even whilst the day was not yet at the full. Each time she came to the edge of her land and looked—timorously, anxiously—along the furrow, it seemed that within five minutes Anne had gone perches for her yards, reaped three sheaves for her one; each time she rose to twist or tie a band and saw that big sunbonnet go bobbing among the sheaves, Judy’s heart fell and it was with her as if Anne were running in the race and she only crawling. She looked back along the sheaf-strewn stubble—such a little way it was; she looked over the wheat out towards the field-head—such a long, long way it was. Doggedly, feverishly, she cut across the land, doggedly and still more feverishly cut back; then, sheaf on knee and hook on shoulder, stole a look, a halting bodeful look. . . . Oh, she was miles away. She

would never catch her, not if she worked day and night and every hour of them. It was cruel. It was bitter. She would be disgraced. She would die before night-fall. She felt weak, thirsty, tired. The sun was like fire upon her back—her narrow little back; and upon her head—her foolish little head, with its withered face and hungry eyes and scanty twist of hair below an old rush hat. Her hands were sore, covered with pricks and wounds. Her feet were bruised, were like lead. *Thump, thump*, went something in her forehead; *thump, thump*, as she stooped and plodded. Every bone in her ached and cried; she was smoking hot; there were times when she felt ready to sink upon the stubble, or rush for home, or strip naked in a mad skelter for the river. Ah, but the hours dragged. Ah, but the sun was cruel.

Rest? No, she must not rest. Give up? Go to Anne and say she was beaten? No—no—no! Not if she were dying. Oh, she would get quicker. She must get quicker. She was out of practice. She had fallen upon a heavy patch. In another hour or so she would be hardened to the work, used to the sun; in a little while would be out of that wilderness, over that weary bank on which the wheat stood like bulrushes, out and away for head of the field. If only she could hurry now, hurry for just a while; if only she could catch up a yard or two by dinner-time. . . . Where—where was Anne now? Ah, God's mercy, she was farther away than ever! Never could she catch her. . . . But she must; must work harder and quicker, must hurry back from dinner, must work late that night, must—must. . . . "Ah, my Father," cried Judy,

and turning looked piteously towards home, "will dinner-time niver, niver come?"

It came at last, that long expected hour of one o'clock, came shouted from the hills and whistled shrilly from the fields; came like an angel's blessed message to Judy and sent her speeding for home. She had far to go and must needs hurry. The way was rough and tortuous, now running over the broken ends of potato-ridges, now winding past bogholes and turf-banks in and out through the heather, now rising suddenly for the hills and going on past the whins and rushes, the hedges and ditches, up through the rain-blanchèd fields: it was a weary way and Judy was very weary; still, what mattered these things now? Had she not an hour, a whole hour, in which to rest back and bones, and to satisfy the wolves of hunger? Was she not free at last, free if only for an hour, from the tyranny of the sun and the brutality of toil? A whole hour! Fifteen minutes home, fifteen back; the rest in blessed luxury on a chair by the table. It was great. What mattered now all that lay there behind—the broad lands, the ugly stubble, the broiling sun, the weariness and heartache; what mattered either all that might happen out there—there beyond that hour of rest, between it and the dark. Let all that go. She was free now. Work was nothing to her. Anne was nothing to her. . . .

Anne? What was Anne doing? Was she working still? Reluctantly, but inevitably, Judy turred on the crest of Rhamus and had sight of Anne in the valley below, her skirt flowing loose, sleeves down, sunbonnet in hand, making leisurely through the heather on her

way towards home. Oh, easy for her to take time, easy to go flaunting beneath the sun. "Heavens above," cried Judy, turning in a panic, "will I niver, niver get home?"

Across another field or two, over the Bunn road and down a boreen; and there was home at last, the door open, the fowls squawking on the street, the pig squealing in the sty, the children waiting patiently for mother and dinner. "Ah, mammy, mammy," they called, "here's mammy"; then gathered round Judy's skirts and with her flocked into the smoke-wreathed kitchen.

No time in there for the decencies of civilization, no chance of its luxuries; no white cloth on a well-scrubbed table, with knives and forks, plates and spoons, and smoking dishes for which to render unto God due thanks. No, no. These things—mercies we call them—are for others, not for Judy Brady and her kind. A full quiver, a two-roomed cabin, somewhere to sleep and a little to eat: such, year in year out, is the portion in life doled out to the Bradys. There are not three knives in the house, not two forks; there is no cloth, no meat, only a rickety table, a few stools and chairs, a tin or two, a pot or two, and of the earth's good increase potatoes and salt, tea and buttermilk, a handful of Indian meal and a cake of soda bread. Think of that, ye pampered citizens; think of it and just for a minute peep through the smoke at the Bradys at dinner.

See; Judy sets a basket over a tub, lifts a pot from the fire, grips it by the foot in a corner of her skirt and empties it into the basket. A great and pungent steam

rolls up; the water rushes off; soon you have sight of a heap of potatoes, not quite clean, not very large, not altogether savoury—but hot, ay, piping hot. No time to lose. Judy hurries to the dresser, brings a noggin of milk (sour buttermilk it is at a penny a gallon) and a saucer of salt, pulls a stool to the basket and sits down. “Gather up, childer,” she says; and the children gather up, some on stools, one kneeling by the tub, another hunkered on the floor. Whew! How hot the potatoes are. From hand to hand they toss them, peel them as best they can, dip them into the salt; down they go with just a relish of buttermilk wherewith to cool and to flavour. There is full silence in there; not a head turns to the sunlight, not an eye moves from the basket; ding-dong it is, quick and steadily, from first to last. Yes; maybe it is barbaric, or brutish, or whatever you like: still, beggars may not choose, you know, and not seldom but often do these barbarians of Bradys thank the great Giver of all for His mercies. . . .

But wait. The basket is empty and the noggin; dinner is over; and now—ah, now Judy is happy. Now luxury reigns in the house of the Bradys. See Judy sitting there like a queen, in this hand a slice of bread and dripping, in that a bowl of strong black tea. You see her? Now she takes a bite and a sip; now the children take each a sip and a bite, one by one round all the flock. You see them; and you see Judy? Is she not happy? Happy; ay, as a queen on her throne, for just that five minutes of tea and luxury. Watch how she shuts her eyes and lingeringly sips, her knees crossed the while, shoulders relaxed, and elbow poised on a hand.

The little Sybarite! Her brow is smooth, her eye mild and contented; she is flushed, almost radiant. No thought of work now, or of the tyrant sun, or of Anne in her sunbonnet. No, no. Judy tastes heaven now.

All gone. She puts down the bowl, sighs as she looks towards the door; leans back and closes her eyes. Gradually her head sinks; the children's voices come dreamily from the fields; her breathing quickens . . . just a minute of sweet sleep . . . then a start, a leap from her chair—and Judy once more is facing life and the sun.

Hurriedly, almost running at times, Judy toiled across the fields; came to the wheat-field, just as the hay carts went clanking from Emo, and at once set to work. For some yards before her the crop stood straight and high; the sun had gone under a passing cloud; she felt fresher, stronger, glad of heart too at thought that she was back before Anne and gaining ground at every stroke. Yes; surely she was gaining now. Every sheaf was another to the good. If only Anne would delay her coming for a while; if only something—sickness, sleep, no matter what—would keep her away for another half hour; if only, thought Judy and twisted her head towards Rhamus hill, if only. . . .

Ah, but there she was! No matter. She had gained something; she felt able now, thank God, to hold her own with anyone. Let Anne come. Who cared? Anne Daly, indeed! Look at her coming through the heather, one foot dragging after another as if she were stepping to a burial. See her flaunting over the stubble, head back, arms swinging, her face all grins and impu-

dence; flaunting along in her superior way. Let her flaunt. Who cared?

Ah, but Judy despised her. Who was Anne Daly, in the name of goodness, to rig herself out in such airs; and what better was she than another? Anne Daly, indeed, who hadn't sixpence in the world that didn't come from Patsey in the States. See her above there, leisurely rolling up her sleeves, tucking up her skirt, fixing the strings of her sunbonnet; pretending to take everything so easily, pretending it was the simplest thing in life to beat Judy Brady at the reaping. "Is it, then?" cried Judy, fiercely within herself. "Is it, then? Oh, by the king, but I'll show her!" And her blood surging with the potency of tea and potatoes, Judy stooped to the showing.

The afternoon wore on, heavy with autumnal heat and the burden of the drowsy hours. The whole country seemed gone asleep in the big eye of the sun, with only a child here and there playing in it, or a dog yapping at the sky, or a cart going softly out into that other country—the country away towards the mountain, or out beyond the shining river, or across the crouching hills; the land whence came those distant sounds of life and where maybe were folk whose portion was not sleep; the land that was anywhere outside Emo. You could almost feel the quietude just as you could almost see the shimmering heat. Hardly a sound was there. The fields seemed deserted. Here and there you looked, from hill to hill, across the bog, away through the haze towards Bunn or back towards the long dim mountain: then, quite suddenly, heard the carts clanking back

from the meadows, heard voices above in the haggard, heard the sound of a woman singing at her work and saw two figures move aslant through the wheat far down in the misty valley. So there was life in old Emo after all.

Well might Anne Daly go singing through that drowsy afternoon. Good luck and good humour were hers that day. All the morning things had gone well with her; now things were going even better still. Work went easily. The weather was kindly. Thoughts ran pleasantly. Think of going home to dinner and finding on the dresser that letter from Patsey; a long letter enclosing an order for twenty dollars and a picture of Patsey himself all grand in his policeman's uniform with his big staff and his big moustache. Think also of finding her brand new dress waiting ready on a chair; all red it was, with beads upon it and broad braid and the brightest of buttons, and it fitting her like a glove. No wonder she had enjoyed her dinner—her toasted herring with potatoes and bread and a mug of tea at the end—and had lingered over it, when all through it Patsey's order had been lying in her lap, and Patsey's picture propped against the noggin before her, and the brand new dress hanging at her elbow on a chair; no wonder she had loitered over her tea, and was longing for night, and meantime was feeling happy as a bird. Ah, but she would cut a fling on Sunday through the chapel gates; ah, but the women would squirm on the pavements next market day in Bunn; ah, but she would laugh to see James' face that night when he set eyes on the letter and the picture and the money order. Sing!

She had to sing. Work! She gloried in it that blessed day. See how much she had reaped since morning, more than half a land, as much as two women might reap in the time; as much as Judy would do from sunrise to sunset.

Ah, poor Judy, thought Anne and shook her head; poor, poor Judy! There she was toiling away, moiling and striving, breaking her heart with vexation, looking towards her sometimes with angry, jealous eyes. It's no use Judy, *agra*; no use at all. Better give up your foolishness at once, own you're beaten, shake hands and forgive and forget. Far better do that, Judy, than go bursting your little heart there in the sun. It's no use, Judy; you haven't the strength and you haven't the knack. Just watch a minute, woman alive, till you see how I do it. See, *c* cut and a twist and there's the band; now *one, two, three*, and there's a handful for you, *one, two, three*, and there's half a sheaf. . . . There's no fluster, Judy; no bungling and no temper. It's all knowledge, Judy; that and a share of strength. Listen to the crisp cut I have with a hook. Listen to the soft rustle of the wheat as it falls before me. See how easily I'm taking things, fresh as a lark, merry as a sandpiper; and listen, Judy, you poor wee creature, listen to the song I'm singing through this blessed day.

Well indeed might Anne lift up her voice in singing; and well might Judy, at sound of it, go vexing her heart in bitterness. With her things were not making for the better, but from bad to worse only. The morning had been wretched; the afternoon was pitiable. Nothing

seemed to go right, nothing whatever. Her hook was blunt, its handle loose; the wheat was tough and heavy, as tangled and contrary as things themselves; the sun was terrible, smiting her as though she were the only sinner in the world; her feet were blistered, her hands scratched and bleeding; her back ached, her head whirled and throbbed, not a bone had she that did not cry aloud: and she was so hungry again, was this wretched little Judy. Long ago had the impulse given of tea and potatoes died out; long ago had all hope of conquering Anne withered away. She knew she was doing foolishly; fervently she longed for food and rest; twenty times already had she been tempted to throw down her hook and make friends with Anne: and here for the twenty and first time was she fighting both temptation and longing with all her strength. Everything was against her, yet she would not give way. Nothing favoured her, yet still she strove. The harder she tried the less did she seem to achieve; it was certain that striving with Anne meant bitter defeat; whether she strove or not it would be all the same in the end—not a penny the more or a trouble the less: everything was against her, yet on she plodded, never resting, seldom wavering, pressed on against will and strength by the fierce impulse of jealous spleen that held and mastered her. Give way, said she; give way to Anne Daly! No; not till she dropped gasping! She might be beaten, be disgraced; but never should it be said of her that she had not striven to the end. Let Anne talk and flout, sing and boast; let people say what they would; let happen what might, for that day at least

she Listen to her singing over there. Ah, but Judy hated her; and not that day only and for that day's work alone, but always and for many a thing. She remembered many a slight, many a grudge. How often had Anne Daly treated her like dirt and spoken to her as to a tinker's hussy? Who went telling stories to the neighbours about Judy Brady's children and Judy Brady's affairs? Who had said that Mike and she were always squabbling, and the children in tatters, and the house a disgrace, and herself half-starved? Oh, not for that day's work only had Judy a grudge against Anne, but for the doings of many a day. It all came back to her, rushing back as she toiled wearily among the wheat, and filled her with anger. Who was Anne Daly? she asked herself again, maybe for the thousandth time that day; and what better was she than another? Even if she was big and ugly, even if she had two dresses to her back and a new one coming, even if she had a brother in the Chicago police and a trifle in the bank that he had sent her, even if she was able to read and write and figure; what of that and all that? cried Judy within herself; then lifted eyes and saw Anne bending low on the next land, reaping there in her prideful strength and raising her voice insolently in singing. Singing! That was another of her tricks; another of her ways of showing how easily she could conquer and how little she cared. Singing! Might sorrow choke her! Look at the big body of her, the big red arms, the scarecrow of a face. Ah, if she were only near her for a minute—with her hands, the hook, with anything; only at her face for a minute till she

killed the singing in her! Might sorrow choke her. Might she gash her arm. Might she die in the work-house. Might. . . .

"Ah, stop your trapple over there," shouted Judy at last, quivering from crown to heel. "Is it that ye want to deafen me? Isn't it enough to be hearin' the corn-crakes all the night without havin' *your* screechin' to bear all the day? Quit wi' ye," shouted Judy; "I'm sick o' ye!"

Slowly Anne drew herself erect, slowly turned; set hands on hips and steadily, from the depths of her sun-bonnet, eyed Judy across the stretch of wheat that stood between them.

"Aw," said she, as Judy paused; "aw, an' is that yourself, Mrs. Judy Brady? Faith now, but I'm glad to be seein' ye. Sure 'twas at home I imagined ye to be." Anne laughed. "Aw, good evenin'," she went on and bobbed her head mockingly; "good evenin' to ye, Mrs. Judy Brady."

"An' g' luck to you, Anne Daly; an' bad luck to ye," answered Judy in a splutter of wrath; then hurried along the innermost furrow, came near to Anne and stretched an arm. "Listen to me," she cried across the wheat. "I scorn the face o' ye—I'm 'shamed to be in sight o' ye—I don't care that for ye." Judy snapped her fingers. "For all your capers, I tell ye again that I'm as good as you—an' better, ay, better—a better woman, an' a better. . . ."

At loss of a word—maybe wisely at loss, for in face of facts even anger might not hide from her how completely she was delivering herself into Anne's hands—

Judy paused; and quick at heel of the pause came Anne's thrust.

"Is that you again, Mrs. Brady, dear?" she asked, rising on tiptoe and craning forward. "I'm heazin' somethin' over there, but sure— Aw, it is yourself. Well now! But would it be troublin' ye, Mrs. Brady," said Anne in her suavest way, "to be gettin' up on a stone or somethin' out o' the furrow till I get a look at ye? Sure I'm doin' me best—but, och, the wheat is high between us."

Again Anne laughed mockingly; and again Judy spluttered and quivered and cried.

"High!" said she. "High, is it you'd be sayin'! Aw, an' I wish to glory it was twice as high an' was hidin' your ugly countenance from the eyes o' me. Look at ye over there, as big an' fat as a Mullingar store-fed. . . . Ah, you're laughin' again, are ye? Well, laugh away. It's all ye can do, that an' go spreadin' scandal over the country about your neighbours, an' boastin' about you an' yours, an' runnin' down them that's better nor you. Who are you, Anne Daly, I ax ye?" cried Judy, once more fixing Anne with a trembling arm. "What impidence is it of ye to dare open your lips about me or mine? Listen to me," cried Judy, and shook a fist across the wheat. "If iver I hear again that the name o' me crosses your lips I'll—I'll—be the king, I'll flitter ye," shouted this heroic little Judy. "I'll come an' I'll flitter ye. Ye hear me? The impidence of ye," Judy went on responsive to Anne's scornful laugh; "the—the. . . . Ah, what can I say to ye that's bad enough? Look at ye over there," cried Judy, with a

sudden hark-back to personalities; "look at the big ugly, mean face o' ye. Ah, if I was only at it for two minutes—if I only was!"

The laughter died in Anne's eyes; still with hands on her hips, she looked along the narrow stretch of wheat that stood between her and Judy.

"There's only that between us," she said, nodding. "Will I be comin' to you or you to me?"

Judy blanched a little; then looked her bravest.

"It's—it's as ye like, Anne Daly;" and at the halting words and at sight of Judy's face, Anne laughed again, and turned away, and turned again and spoke.

"Ah, Lord sees," she said; "Lord sees an' save us, for I'll die this day! . . . Judy Brady, what in glory's name's come to ye, or what romancin' is this I'll be hearin'! Ach, woman dear, what ails ye! What——?"

"I want none o' your questionin', Fat Anne."

"I want less o' your impidence, Yellow Judy," retorted Anne; "an' at this mortal minute I'm wishful for none o' your company. I'm sick o' ye, Judy," said Anne, with a wave of her arm; "an' I'm 'shamed o' ye. . . . Woman alive, what have I done to ye, or what's come over ye all in a day? Just because I spoke a sensible word to ye this mornin' . . . Ah, go to your reapin'," said Anne half turning; "an' do somethin' that'll be a credit to ye. Whisht your noise an' go. Look," said Anne and pointed towards Judy's sheaves; "look at your day's work. *That's* all that's come o' your strivin'; *that's* all you've got to look back upon

. . . . 'Ah, quit wastin' your time where you're not wanted. I'll not hear ye," cried Anne, spreading a hand against Judy's protests; "an' I'll not quarrel wi' ye; an' I'll strive no more wi' ye. Go your own ways, Judy Brady, an' ask the Lord to give ye sense."

At sound of shrill whistling behind her, Anne paused, looked round and saw a boy come slowly through the heather carrying a basket and a tin can. "Aw, Lord be thanked," said she with a sigh; "sure it's Johnny comin' with the tay." She threw down her hook, walked some yards along the stubble; then halted and turned again to Judy. "I say, Judy," said she, "quit your capers an' come an' have a sup. There's enough an' to spare, an' you're welcome."

"Not if I was dyin' for it," answered Judy defiantly, "not if me tongue was parched would I taste your tay, Anne Daly"; then slowly went down the furrow and came to her stubble again and bent low and went on with her reaping. Very hungry she was and tired, sore racked in mind and body; but still was her spirit untamed and her will unbroken.

"I'll beat her yet," she muttered. "I'll not give in. I'll be even with her yet." Steadily she worked on; then, quite suddenly, stood upright, looked towards Thrasna river and softly laughed. "Ho, ho," she laughed; "ho, ho. . . ." Judy had an idea.

Then the sun fell; the shadows died upon the hills; in the valleys the mists began to creep: and down from the west stole old Night in his cloak with gifts of peace and rest and sweet sleep in his hands.

III

ABOUT ten o'clock that night, Judy slipped out of bed, dressed quietly, crept noiselessly over the clay floor down to the kitchen; there drank some tea from a porringer that stood in the hot ashes, laced on her boots, threw a shawl about head and shoulders, lifted the latch, and munching a piece of bread, stepped softly out into the moonlight.

The night was clear and very bright with the moon at the full; and though the hour was early, everything everywhere was strangely quiet—everything except the dogs here and there among the poplars and the drums rolling softly far off in Orange Gorteen. But in Emo and Bilboa nothing stirred, not a foot on the roadway, not a hand in the darkened cottages; even the beasts were quiet there, all hushed and sleeping beneath the moon.

Leaving the boreen, Judy turned along the Bunn road, walking swiftly in its middle through the gray dust and eating her bread as she went; hurried up the slope towards Lackan, turned at Stonegate down the Clackan road, and at foot of the hill turned again through a gateway along the lane which bends round into Emo bog. It was gloomy here, with great poplar and willow hedges on either hand; but soon she was out in the moonlight again, and now on the rutted pass that runs straight through the heather for Thrasna river and the Bilboa hills. Along this she went, going swiftly with eyes looking straight before her; presently turned from

the turf-banks, struck through a potato-patch and came to the narrow plank that led into the wheat-field.

Timidly, her arms balancing up and down and eyes bent on her halting feet, Judy crossed the plank; hurried past the stooks over the stubble and came to the patch of wheat that stood on the end of her first land. A goodly patch it was, offering maybe a matter of three hours' work, and showing to a straw how much, through a twelve hours' day, Anne Daly was a better reaper than Judy Brady; a goodly patch from which, some four hours ago, Judy had turned for home and supper and bed, and to which she had now come back for a while of diversion under the moon.

Just a minute she stood looking at the long row of stooks on her left, at the shorter row behind, at the plot of wheat in front; just a glance she threw at the moon, the hills, the shining walls of Emo above in the trees, just a moment stood mumbling a prayer; then, quickly, flung down her shawl, pulled her sickle from a stook, stooped and set to work.

It was the first time that Judy had worked by moonlight, and she found the task not easy. The light was wonderfully soft and bright; but it seemed rather to lie on things—on her hands, the wheat, the sickle-blade—rather to lie on these and embellish them than to make them stand forth naked and clear as in the broad shine of the sun. It was like working by candle light, Judy thought; there was about it an uncertainty, a vagueness, a mysterious glamour, one might call it, which puzzled her and gave an odd sensation of being not quite herself, of being outside herself and groping un-

cannily in a world of dreams. She was afraid to cut boldly; more than once she struck clay, or left stubble inches too long; now she filled her hook to overflowing, and now gathered but a straw into her hand. Then the shadows troubled her greatly. She seemed always to be working in her own light, just as though she were at home in the kitchen, she thought, with her back to the candle. And they were so black too, were these shadows—of the wheat, her arms, herself—and mocked her movements so solemnly and dogged her steps so grimly; ah, sure, thought Judy, plodding on heroically in spite of herself, what with the light and the dark it was woeful entirely.

But more than all this did the unearthly loneliness trouble her. It was all so quiet, so big and empty, so bright and strange. Not even a breath of wind was there, not a stir; from herself away up to the big sky, and away all round everywhere, was just one great well of silence and strangeness, with only her one self awake and striving in it and only the creatures of dogs here and there to keep her company. Ah, if it hadn't been for the dogs, thought Judy, if it hadn't been for the noise of them she must have snatched her shawl long ago and run. If only someone would shout somewhere, or sing; if only a cart would go clanking along the road, or a cot go splashing down the river; if she could only see a light somewhere, or could think that a friend was near her—things would then be not so bad. But there was no one, nothing; nothing but her one self bending there in the big empty world. She dared not look up, or round about her. She dared hardly think. The

sound of her heart beating in her ear was, at times, like the call of terror. It was only by biting her lip hard and long that, sometimes, she kept from shrieking; it was only by keeping sternly to her task, not halting for a breath, not wavering a yard, that she fought back ignominious panic. There were times, odd moments and minutes, when it needed but a cloud to darken the moon, or so much as a mouse to stir in the wheat, to send her shivering to her knees, jabbering to the saints with her face in her hands.

But nothing happened, nothing. Steadily, serenely the moon held her course across the heavens; far and wide the land lay sleeping in the soft magic of her shine; and there, through all the wonder of the night, went plodding that weird little figure of a Judy, groping and stumbling, muttering and praying, cowering in sight of such beauty and splendour from she knew not what.

She had been at work maybe an hour, when suddenly it was borne in upon her that something was coming. At once she crouched, trembling and stricken; presently found courage to rise a little and timorously to look around her. There was no one on the stubble, nothing on the hills before her; but coming slowly across the field on her left was the figure of a man.

A man? Or was it a ghost? Again Judy crouched, heart in her throat and lips parched; crouched low and, as if fascinated, watched the figure come nearer, make the gap at head of the field and turn along the land towards her. Who was it? In God's name, what was going to happen? Who—who And with that, from

behind a stook, stepped the battered figure of Mike her husband.

Ah, the blessed relief. Like heaven itself was that sight of his face. But what had brought him? How did he know? Judy rose; and seeing her, Mike halted, head forward and his chin in his hand.

"Aw, you're there," said he. "That's you, is it? Sure I was thinkin' so." Slowly he came forward; halted again. "Tell me, Judy Brady—what, in glory's name, brings ye here? What are ye doin'?" Mike stopped and looked at the scattered sheaves, then at the narrow plot of wheat, then at the hook in Judy's hand. "Why—why, it's mad ye are. Reapin' be moonlight in the dead o' night—reapin' here be yourself! Why, it's mad ye are," said Mike again, and stepping close to Judy took her by the shoulder. "Here, come away home to your bed," he said roughly; "come away wi' ye."

Now, ordinarily, Judy was the most docile of wives and timorous of women; but the events of that day had roused something within her, some long repressed spirit of boldness, and had lifted her out of herself. So that now when Mike took her by the shoulder, she looked him boldly in the face and answered almost defiantly.

"I'll not," she said; "not a foot. I can do as I like, I suppose? An' what brings you here, may I ax?" questioned Judy, with a quick turning of the tables. "Can't a woman come out for an hour without bein' followed like a child? Suppose I am reapin' be moonlight, what's that to anyone but meself?"

Never before had Judy spoken to Mike in such fash-

ion. He was taken aback; forgot to assert himself. He dropped his head, rubbed his eyes; stood looking at his feet and wondering if he were asleep or awake.

"I'm not goin' home; not a foot till I'm ready to go. I'll stay to mornin' if I like. . . . Where's the childer?" asked Judy, of a sudden. Still Mike stood wondering at the run of things. "Where's the childer, I ask ye?" cried Judy again. "Where are they?"

Mike looked towards Rhamus hill. "They're yonder," said he, with a nod, "yonder at home."

"At home? Yonder be themselves? Ah, the creatures! They'll be lost, they'll be—. Suppose the house goes afire? Suppose someone comes an' kills them? . . . Ah, I'll go home," cried Judy, making for her shawl; "I'll go home."

Just this was what Mike wanted her to do; but man-like he had to say so. "That's right," said he; and with the word, Judy stopped and turned.

"No, I'll not," she said; "not a foot. It's yourself that'll go, Mike Brady. Away wi' ye, I tell ye. Don't waste one minute, I say. Suppose the goat got at them, or the pig . . ."

Mike had almost found himself. He snorted.

"Ah, quit your foolery, Judy, for the Lord's sake. Have wit. Didn't I latch the door after me? Isn't the fire raked? What'd ail them this night more'n another? . . . Are ye comin' home wi' me?" asked Mike again. "Are ye, I say? I'll not go without ye, not a step. Not a wink o' sleep could I get after I heard ye let fall the latch an' missed ye from the bed . . ."

"Ye heard me?" said Judy. "Ye heard the latch?"

But—what sent ye after me? How did ye know 'twas here I was?"

"Ah, I dunno," came back, with a yawn; "'twas chance. I lay there wonderin' an' wonderin', an' do what I would not an eye could I close. Says I to meself: Who's sick? Who's called for her? What woman's expectin'? An' then thinks I of what ye were tellin' me at supper-time about Anne an' you. . . . Are ye comin' home, I say?" asked Mike irritably, as if weary of all this explanation, and over the point of his shoulder looked at his wife.

"Naw; I'm not—not till that's finished." With her hook Judy pointed at the plot of wheat. "When that's done I'll go—an' no sooner."

Mike stood rubbing his chin and looking sideways at Judy. He was beginning to understand her. Just a glimmer he had of the play of her humour.

"I know," he said at last. "I see." He looked at the wheat-patch. "It'll take ye mebbe two hours yet?" Judy turned from him without answering. "When it's done," Mike kept on, "you'll be level with Anne?"

"That's so."

"I see. Now I see." Mike smiled knowingly. "An' what better'll ye be then nor ye are now, I'm wonderin'? Eh?" said Mike, cocking his wise head. Judy kept silent. "Ah, woman dear, come home wi' ye an' quit your foolishness. What'll people say when they hear o' ye? What'll Anne do but laugh when she sees what you've been at?"

"Will she?" Judy's smile was grim. "Ah, will she, indeed!"

“Ay, will she. An’ what better’ll yourself be in the end for all your slavery? Wait.” Stepping aside, Mike ran his eye from head to foot over Judy’s land. “Why it’s foolery,” he said, coming back; “fair foolery. You’ll not be two shillin’s richer for it all. Not two shillin’s, I say. All that slavery for wages like that,” cried Mike, and shot out an arm and let his eyes flash in the moonlight. “Why it’s shameful; it’s a scandal. Two shillin’s—two shillin’s!”

Then said Judy:

“Ah, whisht. Ye know nothin’. It’s not the money. It’s— Ah, whisht,” said Judy, walking to her patch; “ye know nothin’.”

“An’ you’re not comin’?” asked Mike. “You’ll still be keepin’ on?”

“I’m goin’ to finish.” And scrunch went Judy’s hook through the yellow wheat.

Mike turned away, in wonderment and disgust. The foolishness of women, he thought, and looked at the moon. All for two shillings? Two shillings! It was shameful.

Ah, the foolishness o’ women, the contrariness o’ them! They were unknowable, untrustable, as full o’ whims and notions as a whin was full o’ thorns. You said this and they did that, you said t’other and they answered this. They were all the same, as like as sheep in a field—Judy no better than the rest, the rest as bad as Judy. See her there moilin’ in the moonshine, breaking her back for sake of a notion. Think of himself too, moiderin’ there like a fool in the middle of the night, missing his sleep and his rest, get-

ting as hungry as a trooper, feeling as limp as a rope. Sure it was shameful. And all because o' women and their whims. Ach! . . . Should he go home? No; sorrow a foot. What was the good if he couldn't sleep? No; he'd wait for herself, thought Mike; then pulled out his pipe, sat down on a sheaf and with his eyes steady on the hedge before him began to smoke. Not a thought had he, or an eye, for the matchless beauty of the night. Not a thought had he—except one maybe of mingled wonder and disgust—for his wife toiling there behind him, not a thought of sympathy or of admiration. She was a fool, he said; an unknowable fool. He would have stared at you (and Judy no less, be it said), had you hinted that sleep might come the sooner did he seek Anne's hook and reap a stook or two. Stolidly he sat on his sheaf, blinking at the hedge; presently rose, yawned heavily and stretched himself; then pulled some sheaves together lay down upon them and with his face to the stars went to sleep.

But Judy wrought on. The night had no terrors for her now, now that Mike had come. She felt brave and strong; the shadows and the loneliness and the strange light troubled her no longer; twice as fast she could work and twice as surely, with Mike lying there in the moonlight. Supposing the children were safe, she felt gladder than the world to see his face. Ah, the relief his coming had brought, the pleasure it was to see him lying there on the sheaves. She hoped his sleep was sound; hoped the damp might not find his bones; hoped he might rise fit and well for work in the morning. . . .

Morning? It was morning now. Ay, surely it was;

for there were the cocks crowing above in Emo. Twelve o'clock? Lord sees! Never before had she had such an experience. But what did it matter, thought Judy; what did it all matter, now that Mike had come. Another hour or so and she would be finished; just a stook or two more and she would be level with Anne. Level with Anne? Ah, but that would be great! Think of Anne's look in the morning; think of the joy of seeing her face, of hearing her surprise. Who'd crow then? Who'd have the laugh then? thought Judy, and smiling to herself as she threw a look over her shoulder at Mike, went steadily on.

Finished at last; every grain cut, every sheaf tied, the last stook trim and tight. It was good, thought Judy, and standing back, hands on hips, admiringly ran her eyes over the long row of stooks; it was very good. Now who'd boast? Who'd laugh? Now Anne was answered. Lord, to see her face in the morning, to hear her remarks, to see the glum look of her all day long! And not a word of explanation would Judy give; oh, not one. Quite calmly and unconcernedly she would take her hook, bend back and, just as if nothing had happened, start fair on a new land. . . .

Start fair? A new land? Ah, yes. But what about afterwards—the long day, the weary striving, the old heart-break, the same toil and dread maybe through half the night; what about all that? thought Judy and stood looking at the stooks with joyless eyes. 'Twould be bitter; she'd never be able to bear it; she'd have to make friends with Anne after all. Friends? No, no, thought Judy; then quick was taken with a notion.

Suppose she worked on for another hour, just to get a start of Anne? Her triumph would then be the completer, her work for the day made easier. She felt not very tired, or hungry; a couple of hours' sleep was all she needed; the children were surely safe; Mike was sound and fast: there was nothing to hinder her, nothing. And to think of Anne's face! She saw it now, there before her, all big and red and angry Yes, she'd do it; and the next minute Judy was reaping again, as if for dear life, on the next land.

More than an hour she wrought; then, sleep and hunger and weariness at length mastering her, flung down her hook, left the sheaves lying broadcast on the stubble, threw her shawl over her head, and crossed to Mike.

"Wake up." Hard and long she shook him. "Wake up, I tell ye. I'm done. I'm goin' home. Wake up, I tell ye."

"All right," snapped Mike; "it's all right, I say. Leave me alone, Judy. Dang it, I am awake. Can't ye see I am?" Mike sat upright; rubbed his eyes; blinked a while; looked at his boots, then right and left at the stubble; then raised his eyes and saw Judy standing beside him with the big moon shining over her head. "God above," said he, twisting round on his knees; "is this where I am still?" Stiffly and slowly he rose, rubbed his eyes again and stretched wearily; then, with a growl and a shiver, thrust hands in pockets and by way of the turf-banks and the hills set off homeward with Judy at his heels. And as they went, a miserable couple trudging below the stars over the moonlit fields, their

own shuffling steps in the rushes and the grass made the only sounds that broke the great quiet of the night. Dead—dead—dead as the grave lay all the world in the gleam of the silver moon. "Aw, but it's cowl'd," shivered Mike; "God's truth, but it's cowl'd! Will we niver get home?" said he, plodding along three parts asleep. "Will we niver—niver—niver get home?"

"Ah, to be sure we will," said Judy at last; "to be sure we will. Man alive, aren't we at the dure."

It was between two and three o'clock, that morning of the new September day, when Judy got to bed; by six she was up again and busy preparing breakfast, by seven had started Mike for work, had eaten her Indian meal porridge and tea and bread and was hurrying once more for the wheat field. "If I can only be there before her," she panted; "if I only can till I see her face. I must be before her—I must."

Breathlessly she sped over the hill, across the bog, up the stubble; and there at top of the field, back to a stook and her eyes on the scattered sheaves, sat Anne Daly.

Judy stopped, hand on heart, and her face haggard.

"Ah, I'm late," she gasped; "I didn't see her. . . . Still, what odds anyway? Sure—sure it's all the same." A moment she wavered, standing there among the stooks, lips tight and her eyes hard on the crown of Anne's sunbonnet; then set her face, stepped out bravely, and coming to the new land found her hook and prepared for work. "Sure it's all the same," she said, and with her back to Anne stood rolling up her sleeves; "if I didn't see her, sure I can guess how she looked.

Aw, it's a sore day for her, so it is; a sore day. Think of her sittin' there glowerin' at me. Dear Lord, but it's great! What'll she say! I wonder; what'll she do! Dear Lord, but it's great!" said Judy, and spat on her hand, and twirled her hook, and stooped to cut the first band.

It was just then that Anne Daly rose and spoke.

"Aisy," said she; "aisy wi' ye for one minute, Mrs. Brady, ma'am. Sure I'm mortal obliged for all you've done for me, but I'll not be troublin' ye to do any more."

Still stooping, Judy looked round at Anne; but said nothing.

"Aw, ye needn't be starin' at me," Anne went on, in that suave and masterful way she had—a way which seemed, that morning, the very voice of her strength and freshness; "sure it's not meself's to blame at all. If so be people are neighbourly enough to come doin' me work for me, I'm not the one to grumble. Aw, no. That's not the kind of me at all."

Judy stood upright. "I'm bad at riddles, Mrs. Daly," said she, and steadily met Anne's eye.

"Are ye, then?" came back. "Riddles, ye say. Troth, an' it's yourself's the riddle this mornin', Mrs. Brady, dear; for if ye can't see that you're standin' on the third land an' grippin' a handful o' wheat that be right belongs to me, then you're a bigger fool than ye look."

Haggard to the lips and scarcely breathing, Judy stood looking before her. The third land? Anne's land! This was what she had done! This was the outcome of all her striving. "Aw, my God, but it's sore!"

thought Judy; then, the tears big in her eyes and her face quivering piteously, turned and plodded through the sheaves—Anne's sheaves reaped by herself that morning—to the top of the fourth land. But Anne followed and caught her arm.

"Judy," said she; "I say, Judy. Listen to me, woman. Och, quit your foolery. Come back, I say. Sure I wouldn't be takin' your work from ye for the world. Come back, I say. An' listen to me. I'm sorry for what happened yisterday; sure, I meant nothin' at all. . . . Come back wi' me, Judy; come back."

And Judy went.





THE DIGGERS



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I TELL ye what it is, Mike—this is a mortal curious kind of a world.”

“Ay?”

“It’s powerful curious—powerful. The more I think of it the powerfuller it is.”

“Yis?”

“There’s things in it that’s past all knowin’; there’s things in it that bangs the divil; there’s things Och, but what’s the good o’ talkin’? What’s the good?”

“Well, sorrow a bit.”

“Not one bit. Ye may talk an’ talk till your tongue is stiff, an’ divil a thing in the wide world’s a straw the better or a straw the worse. An’ ye may talk your best, an’ ye may do your best, an’ ye may be the wisest man that iver winked an eye; an’ for all your cliverness, if the spuds are goin’ to rot they’ll rot in spite o’ ye. They will so—they’ll rot in spite o’ ye.”

“Aw, troth will they; sure they will.”

“Ah, to be sure; why, to be sure. It’s the will o’ God does it; iverything comes just as it’s sent. There’s no good in strivin’ agen things at all—not a bit. Ye may spray an’ spray till the pratics look as if they’d been whitewashed, an’ if it’s sent the blight’ll come as sure as the sun’ll set. Nothin’ll stop it—nothin’ in the world. It’s the will o’ God. For all that”

James Daly straightened himself in the furrow,

looked slowly and thoughtfully here and there about him, threw a glance over his shoulder at the falling sun; then rested both hands on his spade-head, leant forward upon them and stood eyeing the scanty dribble of potatoes that lay on the ridge before him. His face wore a solemn expression, his eyes were grave; he had the air of one standing knee deep and doubtful in the troublous waters of thought. Just a little not himself, beyond himself, he stood there among the withered potato stalks, one foot on the ridge, the other in the furrow, his back bent and head thrust forward. For a minute his mind went groping—peering dimly, you might say, as through that creeping mist of autumn—and he stood looking at things and not seeing them, living for once without knowing it, rapt for a minute out of this mortal curious kind of a world. Then he sighed; came to himself and drew back from his spade; glanced at Mike and went on digging. “Ay,” he said, with a nod and a smile, “aw, just so”; and again, “Aw, yis, indeed”; and once more, “Aw, bedad, ay . . . Why, to be sure.”

Mike Brady ceased working and across a shoulder fixed James Daly with his black little eyes. “Arrah, what the devil’s come to ye all of a suddint,” said he, in his thin vicious way, chin pushed out and his lips scarcely moving, “wi’ your mumblin’ an’ mutterin’ to yourself! Out wi’ it—if you’ve anythin’ to say, out wi’ it like a man.”

James tossed two rotten potatoes and one only half rotten from his spade, broke a clod and spread the ridge level, spat on his hands and stepped back past a kale

head along the furrow. "Ach, 'twas nothin'," he said, without looking up. "I was only wonderin' to me-self."

"Wonderin'? An' what about? Out wi' it, man; out wi' it. Sure it's new to ye this modesty, in troth." Obdurately Mike stood twisted in his furrow, his eyes keen on the battered brim of James' brown hat. "If it's nothin' sure it's all the easier said," he went on; then, James still keeping silence, "Wid it be about the praties rottin' ye were wonderin'?" said he.

"It was," answered James; "it was so. It's the will o' God, says I, that sends us the blight, an' no man can stop it. An' then the thought strikes me: Isn't it a powerful strange way o' doin' things to—to—" James hesitated; stopped.

"Gwan," said Mike, much as a tinker urges his donkey.

"Isn't it a powerful curious way o' managin' the world, thinks I"—steadily James kept digging as he spoke—"to let men work the way they do, breakin' up the ground an' manurin' it, an' puttin' in the seed, an' shovellin' an' weedin'; an' then to let the praties grow an' grow an' grow—an' then, just when you'd wink, to send the blight an' the rot an' destroy the whole ging-bang o' them. Sure it's curious—be the Lord, but it's powerful curious!" James paused a minute; silently Mike turned to his ridge; again spoke James. "I wonder now," said he, "if so be the Lord's will'd have anythin' to do wi' it at all?"

Mike twisted round his head. "What's that?" said he sharply.

"I'm just wonderin'," drawled James, "if so be it's the Lord's will sends blight into the world at all."

"Why, to be sure it is," cried Mike. "Man alive, to be sure."

"Then, all I can say is," continued James, "that there must be powerful little bad in the world for the divil to do—powerful little, say I."

This was startling language. Not often before had Mike Brady heard the like; never in his life heard it from James Daly. He turned quickly, crouching in his furrow and peering into James' face. "Why, heavenly hour, James Daly," said he, in a plaintive wail of reproof. "Man alive, what's come to ye? Heavenly hour——"

James straightened himself; looked at the hills and rubbed his chin; then tilted back his hat and kicked viciously at the potato stalks in his furrow. "Ah, whisht wi' your bleather," said he, and scorned Mike with voice and eye; "you an' your *Heavenly hour!* Quit wi' ye. Is sayin' what I did half as bad as doin' all that?" and James swept an arm towards the blackened ridge-tops. "Couldn't I say twice as bad if I spoke all that's in me mind—ay, an' yourself too, standin' there gawkin' at me? Phat! An' isn't it enough—isn't it twice enough—to make a man curse for iver when it's God's will for him to stand here gropin' for rotten praties the livelong day? Look at them," cried James pushing forth an arm; "look at what's sent to stand between us an' hunger all the winter through. Curse? Be jabbers, but it's enough to drive a man to the madhouse! Look at them—look at them. Half o' them rotten an'

th' other half tainted, an' as many to the stalk as'd feed a robin. Aw, be the holy, it's ojus. I can't stand it. The stink o' them sickens me. What's the good o' diggin' them?" James raised his spade and drove it deep and viciously into the soft black loam. "What's the good o' workin' at all? What's the devil's good?"

Mike was standing turned towards James, elbow on spade-head and cheek in hand; now he looked round upon the fields, considered a minute and answered: "Well, the devil a much then."

"Much? There's none," answered James, striding out upon his ridge and facing Mike again. "We're only wastin' our time. Here's four o'clock in the day, an' in the last hour I've dug as much as we'd ate at home in once. D'ye call that imployment for a grown man? D'ye imagine that's what we're here in the world to do? Hokin' for rotten pratices wi' a spade—slavin' an hour for the makin's of a supper—wearin' all the flesh off our bones to get what'll go before Christmas. D'ye call that imployment, I ax ye? D'ye now?" said James Daly and spread an eloquent hand.

"Well—" Mike looked at his boots, pursed his lips, shook his head; slowly raised his eyes. "Would ye have us not dig them at all?" he asked, with a sly cock of the head. "Sure what'll last us till Christmas is better than nothin', so it is. An' what worse are we off nor . . ."

James turned away, waving a hand at Mike and dolefully shaking his head. "Arrah whisht wi' ye," he said. "Sure it's foolery you're talkin' . . . To be

sure the praties must be dug; but what I was askin' ye is this: D'ye call this employment for grown men? D'ye?"

Mike stood puzzled. He was not used to such talk; seldom before had he known James Daly ask such questions, never seen him with that strange look on his face, that ugly glare in his eyes. He began groping for his pipe. "Aw, bedad, I dunno," he answered. "I dunno."

"Naw, ye don't—to be sure ye don't." Suddenly James wheeled about, eyes and face ablaze. "But I do. I know, Mike Brady. An' it's meself that's tellin' ye that it's no men we are at all. Ye hear that? It's not men we are at all—but danged fools an' slaves. I tell ye it's not grubbin' for rotten praties that men out in the world spend their time. Phat! We're fools, I tell ye; we're slaves, sir; we're ignerant; we know no more o' the world an' what's goin' on in it than—than—" right and left James sought among the ridges for a simile—"than the hat on your head there. We're only just livin' like the cows beyont on the hill. D'ye think India meal stirabout an' rotten praties is the feedin' men get out yonder?" asked James, and bending towards Mike indicated the great outer world of wealth and plenty with a thumb turned backward across his shoulder. "D'ye imagine *they'd* be content wi' fourteenpence a day in the summer, an' a shillin' in the winter, an' nothin' when it's wet, an' the milk of a cow between seven of them an' what rotten praties'd grow on half an acre o' ground? D'ye think *they* live in mud-walls out yonder? D'ye think *they* work fourteen hours a day,

an' all Saturday, an' a while on Sunday, out beyont? Ach, don't be thinkin' it!" James turned from Mike, raising hands and voice in a protest of pitying scorn. "Man alive, ye might just as well be dead for all ye know of things. You're ignerant I tell ye," said James, and voiced his knowledge of Mike's limitations with a contempt that had been masterly had Mike been only less utterly indifferent; "you're behind the times; you're only a babby in short clothes. If ye only knew how to read a paper you'd know better. . . . Listen to me." Again James bent towards Mike, fixing him with glittering eyes and wagging forefinger. "D'ye know what I seen last night in a paper that Master Jem lent me the loan of? I seen that workin' men in England get more'n thirty shillin's a week—ye hear that? An' I seen that they work only eight hours a day, an' only half a day on Saturdays, an' none at all on Sundays—ye hear that? An' listen to me," cried James again, every fibre of him summoning Mike to full attention, "they're not content yit—they're not satisfied even now—they're goin' to strike work if they don't get more. Ye hear me? Ye hear me!" Gradually James had been drawing himself erect, his voice waxing shriller and fiercer with every word: now his arms went out rigid before him and scornfully he cried: "An' here are we—the pair of us—gropin' wi' spades from sunrise to sunset for as much rotten praties as—as . . ."

Speech failed James; emotion stifled him. Wrathfully, aflame with indignation and disgust, he turned from Mike, let fall his hands and stood facing the sun. Its rays came long and feeble out from the glowing

west, struggling valiantly with gathering mists, falling coldly upon the hill crests, and the dim patches of fields, and the long stretch of blackened potato-land running stricken through Emo valley; falling upon James Daly also, standing there in his tatters on a trampled ridge wrathfully chewing his morsel of thought. *Slaves fools ignorance injustice*: the words, or the thoughts born of them, swirled wildly in his brain; and his face, for once, showed black and discontented in the sunlight, and his eyes were ugly to see. Why, he asked of himself—and asked it bitterly, complainingly, even as never before in his life he had asked it—why had God willed such things to be in the world? Why had fate condemned him to this life of toil and poverty, of hunger and ignorance? Why should others be better than he; have stone houses to live in, and easy work, and plenty of holidays, and lots of money? Why was it? Did God will it all? Or was it the devil? Or was it just chance? asked James at last; then, pulled out his spade, turned and stepped down into his furrow. “It’s curious,” said he, with a shake of the head; “be the Lord above, but it’s a mortal curious kind of a world!”

And Mike answered from his furrow: “Ay, it is. But for all that even the rotten praties have to be dug. . . . Whisht. Aw, be the piper, if here isn’t Master Jem himself comin’ to us across the bottom. Sure now; sure now”

II

ALONG the valley, from Emo hill, a youth came stepping across the ridges, gun on shoulder and dog at heel. He was tall, broad-shouldered, lithe; face square and well-featured, eyes dark and deep, expression open and fearless. He wore brown tweeds, leather leggings, heavy boots and a tam-o'-shanter cap. In this pocket was a book, in that a newspaper, in another cartridges. He looked very strong, youth and height notwithstanding; his head was admirably poised, his stride long and free: something of a figure he made, that afternoon in early October, as he swung across the valley from ridge to ridge, the grey haze about him and the sun on his face. Only his face was hard and set that afternoon, and he met the sun with cheerless eyes.

"Good evenin', boys."

"Och, an' good evenin' to yourself, Master Jem. . . . Out for a bang at the ducks you'll be?"

"Ay." Jem sat down on a ridge, face towards Thrasna river and back to the sun, laid his gun across his knees and called Tim to the furrow at his feet. "Down, sir," he said; then took the dog's head between his hands and bent towards the faithful brown eyes. "Poor old man," crooned the lad. "There's a boy—there's a man." He patted the close-curved neck and fondled the long soft ears; stooped lower and took a lick upon his cheek. "Poor old man," said Jem; "poor old boy"; then sat upright and looked slowly along the straggling line of

potatoes that lay on the ridge before him. "That's a fat crop, James," said he with a nod.

"Ay, faith." James laughed soberly and cast a sardonic eye upon the crop. He had found something of his old placid self again. "Ay faith," said he; "sure we were sayin' that ourselves. They're poor; ay; ojus poor."

"But sure they might be worse," ventured Mike the lean and weebegone.

"Worse? Worse! Then God help the pigs of Ireland." The men laughed; Jem put down his gun and rose. "Here," said he, "give us your spade, Mike, an' fall to the gatherin'. It's too early for the ducks, an' I must be doin' somethin'; an' it'll be dusk before long. Away with ye now," said Jem; then took his place in Mike's furrow, spat on his hands and bent to the digging.

Soberly and almost silently work went on; slowly the sun fell towards the cloud-banks that lay out beyond the mountain; thicker and darker crept the mists along the valley, filling it waist deep—like a river of smoke—from edge to edge. Distant sounds of life and work dropped down from the hills; now and then a swift whizz of wings went high through the gathering dusk; or a spade met a stone, or a kale-stalk broke with a snap, or Tim yawned beside the gun, or a word went from one to another among the diggers. For Irishmen, indeed, the three were strangely silent. The slow crawl of the mist, you might think, had chilled them to moody reserve. They had the air of men who cogitate, working mechanically the while. Up and down the ridges

went Mike, gathering the crop into his basket, emptying his basket at the sorting-place; looking furtively and keenly from time to time up towards the diggers, and muttering dark words of knowingness as he stooped. Slowly along his furrow went James Daly, patiently groping for what he might find, fondly hoping against hope that the next stalk might be more fruitful than the last; looking often, he also, from the corner of his eye at the silent figure in the next furrow, and wondering inwardly at the curiousness of things. "Something's wrong," said James to himself; "something's surely come to him"; but what that something was he might no more than wonder at. For James knew wiser than to drop even a hint; nor did Jem show sign of giving any clue to himself. He never looked up, nor rested for a breath. His teeth were clenched, his jaw set determinedly. A frown knitted his brow. He wrought fiercely, furiously you might say, stabbing at the ground and driving his spade to the ears, breaking the clods viciously, working like one who wreaks upon the earth a passion of energy, or of passion itself. And at last, just as the sun fell behind the mountain and dusk came with a gallop, he raised the spade and banged it flat upon the ground; then stepped upon the ridge.

"It's the last time," he shouted, his voice hoarse and passionate, a clenched hand upraised and his face blanching; "it's the last time. I'll never handle a spade again for him or his. By God, I won't! I'll stand it no more. I'll go—I'll go—I'll go. I'd rather 'list. I'd rather break stones. I'd sooner go to the devil than stay an' be treated like a dog. I'd—Oh, by God, I'll end it!"

Quivering from head to heel, Jem stood fronting the faded splendour of the west, hands by his side and his shoulders squared. At his feet stood Tim the dog, his eyes hungry for a word. Down along the ridge, half-stooped over his basket, hands on knees and mouth agape, stood Mike, motionless among the furrows as any scarecrow. Even James Daly had the look of one bemused.

“I’m sick to the heart of it all. A dog wouldn’t stand it. Nothin’ but wranglin’ an’ squabblin’, an’ shoutin’ an’ fightin’, from mornin’ to night. If I broke me heart I couldn’t please him. The worst word on his tongue he keeps for me. If I was a stranger he daren’t—he daren’t; but his own son he can bully as he likes. Can he? Can he, by the Lord! Oh, I’ll show him. I’ll go—I’ll go—I’ll go. This day ends it for evermore.”

Again Jem paused. Tim crouched at his feet, waiting and wondering. Mike had come nearer; James stood leaning on his spade, looking soberly on the ground. “Ach, no, Master Jem,” said James. “Man alive, no. Sure ye wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t I, then.” Jem turned, with a mocking sound of laughter. “You’ll see, James Daly; you’ll just see. Why shouldn’t I go? D’ye think I’m wanted here? Not me—not me! All that’s wanted of me these parts is just as much work as can be got out o’ me. I’m no more than an ass for anyone to kick at. . . . Everyone’s against me. There’s not one in all Emo cares twopence for me—not one but the dog there at me feet”

"Ach, man alive, Master Jem," protested James Daly; "man alive, quit your talk. Sure it's romancin' ye are."

"It's true, I tell ye." Jem took a step along the ridge, with Tim the dog jumping for his hand. "Not one cares a bawbee about me. If I give me opinion of a thing I'm laughed at. If I lay me hand to a thing I do it wrong. I'm only in the way. I'm only a fool. I'm lazy an' a good-for-nothin' No one understands me," cried Jem, his face to the sun, his voice piteous with that eternal plaint of youth; "no one understands me—an' no one cares."

"Ah, but sure, Master Jem," said James Daly again, "they do care. Man alive, they do. I know it. Man, I've heard the Master praisin' ye meself. Sure it's all from the outside, it's only talk"

"Talk!" Jem's arms flew out and his voice rose high. "Talk, ye say? Ah, that's all ye know about it, James Daly. . . . I wish you'd heard the talk I heard this very day. My dinner nearly choked me to hear it. It was all I could do to keep from goin' for the gun in the corner. He made me blood boil—he cut me to the very heart—he said things to me that a tinker wouldn't stand. An' because I listened to it all he must start on me again out in the yard. Ah, be the king, I couldn't stand it. I was ragin'. I could feel every muscle leapin' in me. I—I——"

Jem paused for breath; then flushed, turned towards the mountain, and stood looking at Tim. Something within him, something that rose like a sob, had stopped speech with a gasp; stopped it just as it was lashing him

headlong from the depths of indiscretion. Another word and he had told all, given the pitiable story of his foolishness and anger to the greedy ears of the world; had shamed both himself and his father in open day, given words to a scene which even now he flushed to recall. Not that he felt regret for the step he had taken, nor remorse for the heartlessness and ingratitude of his doings. Time for these was not yet. Neither was passion dying within him nor the mad flame of rebellion. Just as angry and relentless, just as determined in will and heart, he stood now among the furrows as an hour ago he had stood shouting defiance and threats above in Emo yard. Still, blood was blood, he felt and even he owed something to a father and the word unspoken was not the seed of regret and he was glad that not all his tribulations had gone voiced into the world. He stepped along the ridge, took up his gun and came back.

"Enough talk, boys," said he, "for one night. It's gettin' late an' I'm keepin' ye from your work. Here's another paper for ye, James. Come, Tim, lad." And Jem turned face for the willows.

But James Daly crossed quickly and took him by an arm.

"Listen to me, Master Jem. Whisht now for just a minute. Sure ye won't be leavin' us, Master Jem; och, sure ye won't be goin' an' leavin' us!" James' grip was tight on the lad's arm, his voice came pleading as through tears. "Sure you'll not be goin' from us!" he said.

Jem turned on the ridge. "I'll go surely, James—as sure as God's above me."

"Aw, now—aw, now." James dropped his hand, sighed, looked away. "Aw, now—aw, now!"

"Out into the world I'll go, James—out into the world."

"Aw, now, Master Jem—aw, now!"

"Who'd stay here all his life? Who'd waste himself in a place like this? What chance has a man in this God-forsaken country?" Jem wheeled round upon the ridge. "Look at your country," he said, and mockingly flung out an arm. "Look at the place where they'd keep me all my life! Nothin' but hills an' hedges, an' dirt an' misery, an' hunger an' want—nothin' but the scrapin's of the world. Phat! I'm heart-sick of it. I'll go surely. I'll go surely."

What could James answer to all that? What had he been saying himself not half an hour ago? He looked at his boots. "Och, ay," he said; "och, ay."

"An' listen to me, James Daly." Jem stepped back a little way. "An' listen to me yourself, Mike Brady. If the two o' ye knew what ye ought to know, an' weren't fools, an' had as much manhood in ye as Tim there, it's not here you'd stay slavin' your hearts out all your lives, an' fillin' your bellies with rotten potatoes. Read what's in the paper there an' learn something for yourselves. Men! You're no men! Work! It's slavery you're at! An' look," cried Jem, pointing at Mike's basket, "look at the kind of food the Lord gives ye to eat! . . . Men! You're no men," cried Jem

again and turned his face for the willows. "All the men are out yonder—out yonder."

And striding like a giant the lad went on across the ridges, head back and his eyes looking out into the world.

III

JAMES DALY finished his supper; sat smoking a while before the fire: then rose, put on his coat and made for the door.

"Where are ye goin'?" asked Anne his wife.

"Across the fields."

"An' for what?"

"Me business."

"Lord sees!" Anne gulped down her amazement; ran and took James by the arm. "You're not goin'," she said, "you're not goin' a foot. There's somethin' ailin' ye; there's somethin' on your mind. . . ."

"There's nothin' ailin' me. . . . Ach, quit wi' ye, woman. . . . I'm goin', I tell ye. . . . Let me go—let me go." And shaking free of Anne's grip, James kicked over a stool and strode forth.

Night had gathered dark and threatening. There was no moon, the stars were hidden, only a breath of wind was abroad; silence and the mists held sway in Emo valley and upon it lay heavy an ill-savour of blight and rotteness, a dank breath of decay that came creeping over the heather, overflowed upon the pastures, lurked along James Daly's path and filled him with wretchedness.

It made him shiver, made the night seem gloomier and the burden of life and thought more irksome; drove him at last out among the rushes, and round the oak plantation, and up to the old castle that crowns Rhamus hill.

It was fresh there and quick with a noiseless wind; heartsome also with clatter from the highway and sounds of life from the land of Bilboa: stumbling blindly among the scrub James made his way to the battlements, sat down upon a stone, lighted his pipe, leant forward with arms crossed upon his knees and gave himself to the joys of thought.

It was of the *curiousness* and *onknowableness* of things, the strangeness and mystery of them, that James thought in his dim haphazard way; it was of these in relation to himself and to Master Jem that he thought most of all. He felt restless in mind and body. A cloud of gloom lay heavy upon him. Wherever he looked he saw signs of misery, or of coming misery. His everyday attitude of cheerful indifference, of patient resignation, had gone; and he sat listless, depressed, self-conscious, seeing everything at its worst and nothing right. The world was all wrong. Heaven was unjust, cruel. The past was a failure; the present a misery; the future unthinkable. He had been born in slavery and ignorance, had grown up with them; was doomed to die in their service. Look at the life he led. Think of the hut he lived in. Think of the food he had to eat. "Men," said Master Jem. "You're no men. You're slaves and fools. . . ." Slaves and fools? What else had he himself said that very day? . . . "If the two o' ye knew what

ye ought to know, it's not here you'd stay sflavin' your hearts out." Not here! Then where? What did Master Jem mean? Did he mean that he and Mike should go out even now into the big, wide world? Or did he mean that they ought to rebel against slavery and hunger; do as the men in the newspapers had done? What did Master Jem mean? And what, thought James in a while, did the lad mean about himself? "I'll go—I'll go—I'll go." How he had shouted the words, his eyes flashing like fire! Where was he going? How was he going? Did he mean to go without giving word to the father? . . . Ah, it was pity of the lad. Not a finer boy ever trod God's earth than Master Jem. He was warm and tender of heart, manly and generous; as likeable a lad as you'd find in the world. Sure to see him with a dog, fondling and playing with it, was enough to make one cry. Only he was lazy, and headstrong, and had strange notions that he had learnt in school and in books and newspapers. He hated work. He wanted to use his brains. Emo was too small for him. He wanted to see the world; and the father wanted him to stay at home: and so the play went on. Ah, it was pity. For where could you match the Master for manhood and cleverness in all Ireland? He had the brain of a judge and the heart of a child: only he spoke his mind, and laziness and he were bad friends, and always he drove his own faster than he drove another: and so he and Master Jem couldn't agree. They never had agreed; they never would; and to all appearances this day's play had finished all. "I'll go—I'll go—I'll go," shouted the lad, his eyes flaming

like fire. And he was wise, said James Daly to himself, hunching there lonely on his stone; surely he was wise. Why should he stay here, here in this God-forsaken country? What was here for the kind of him to do? Nothing, nothing. Only fools and slaves were wanted here. . . . Fools and slaves. Oh, by the Lord, if only he was young, had only a chance, knew what to do and how to do it! If only he could get out—out into the big, wide world. If only . . . if only pigs could fly, if only the sky could fall, thought James; then, laughing cheerlessly at the foolishness of himself, left his stone, stumbled out through the scrub and took again to the hillside.

For a while he wandered aimlessly through the rushes; then faced towards Emo; then turned and made for home; then turned again and set out across Rhamus hill for the wilds of Bilboa. Home offered few attractions to his mental eye that night. He dreaded Anne and her questions; revolted from the picture that rose before him of a smoky cabin lighted by a single rush light. Restlessness had taken possession of him, thought drove him like a tyrant. He felt rebellious, reckless. What about Anne? Who wanted a supper of potatoes and buttermilk? What if he didn't sleep, didn't get to work in the morning? To glory with work and slavery, with misery and thinking! For weeks and weeks he had sat at home like a fool: now he was off for a spree. So—driven by fate, you might think—down Rhamus hill went James Daly; crossed Thrasna river; entered Bilboa and came to the house of a friend. "God save all here," was his word as the door swung

back; and behold round the cheerful hearth a little party busy with poteen and cards.

It was one o'clock when the fun stopped by the hearth; it was nearing half past one when James bade the last of his friends good-night, took to the Bunn road and started for home. He had won ninepence, had made free with the poteen, had sung and laughed and cheered: steadily he walked and strove for the middle of the road, but his brain still reeled with excitement and from time to time he skirled fiercely up into the blackness of the night. Brim full of courage he walked, and cried defiance at an empty world.

He was nearing Thrasna river, and had just repulsed an assault by Farrell's dog, when right upon the slope before him arose a sudden clatter—a slow click-clack upon the stones, a stealthy beat of hooves that came down between the hedges and killed all swagger in James Daly with a single heart-beat. Not that he was afraid. No, no. But it was powerful dark and lonely and late and the road was narrow and ugly and it might be something divilish, or someone who meant harm, or it might be a ghost, or—or Who the divil was it anyway? Trembling a little and not very eager of heart, James turned for the ditch and stood back among the whitethorns.

The sound of hooves came nearer, beating and slipping down the slope; and now a snort was heard, and now the stress of anxious breathing, and now, even as a dark form loomed out and passed between James and the sky, a voice saying, "Woh, boy—steady, lad—steady Paddy—woh, lad"; and now, even as the form

passed on and down, no less than a cry from James himself and a rush along the stones. "Master Jem," he called. "Master Jem."

"Woh, Paddy." The horse stopped. "Who's that?"

"Ah, I knew it was you." James came up, stopped and stood swaying on his toes. "Sure I knew your voice; sure I knew the Paddy horse . . ."

"Is that you, James Daly?"

"Ay, it is. Why, devil's in me, can't ye see it is." James lurched. "To be sure it's me."

"What do ye want? What are ye doin' here this hour of the night?"

"Ah, I was only out kaleyin'." James put out a hand and steadied himself against the Paddy horse. "A couple o' the boys an' meself were together yonder in——"

"I know. Well, good-night to ye, James; an' safe home. Keep in the middle of the road an' follow your nose. Come, Paddy." Jem clicked his tongue; the horse moved; James reeled, then lurched forward and clutched at the bridle. "Let go," cried Jem; "let go, ye fool!"

But James held tight. "Naw," said he, his voice big with the courage of poteen; "not a foot I'll let go till ye tell me where you're goin'." The horse swung round, backed against the ditch and there stood plunging, with James gripping the bridle and Jem tossing in the saddle. "Not a foot I'll let go," said James, "not a danged foot."

"Woh, Paddy—woh, man." Jem leant forward,

patting and stroking the horse's neck. "Look here, James. You're fool enough without making yourself worse. Let go, like a man, an' go home to your bed. Anne's waitin' for ye, an' there's all those potatoes to be dug, ye know, an'——"

"I'll niver dig another pratie as long as I live I'll do what I like, an' I'll go where I like I'll not go home, not a foot. What the blazes about Anne? Damme, I'll do as I like! Where are ye goin', I ask ye?" shouted James, raving on the stones.

Then Jem slipped from the saddle. "James," said he, "be quiet, man, for God's sake! People'll hear ye. I'm only goin' for a ride."

"Ride? Ride the divil! Ah, ye can't fool me, Jem boy. I know ye, me son. Yis. An' I know where you're off to. Yis. It's to Glann fair you're goin'. Yis. Ho, I'm the boy. An' whisht; be the king, but I'll g' with ye. I will—I will." Mouthing and bleathering, James let go the bridle and came to Jem's side. "Come on, me son," shouted James, "we'll tramp the road together." And the next minute Jem was in the saddle and off; and behind him James was floundering and running, and shouting, "Wait for me, Jem; ah, dang ye for a blaggard, wait for me."

It was a saying in Emo, that James Daly with drink and a notion in his head would follow the notion to blazes; and assuredly, that morning of his truancy, he pursued his notion with all obstinacy. Rightly or wrongly, he had decided that Master Jem was riding to Glann fair; thereupon, taken with a sudden whim, had willed it that to Glann fair James Daly himself must



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go; thereafter, at sight and sound of Jem's defection, was possessed of this whim (they call it a *notion* in Emo) and driven by it as by a brute passion. It mattered nothing that Glann lay ten miles beyond Bunn town, nothing that it was two o'clock in an October morning, nothing that Master Jem might be riding to anywhere but Glann, nothing that Anne was waiting and wailing, that he was hungry and would soon be weary: these things were not worth a thought, came never within hail of thought: the one thing that mattered in the world was the burning impulse, the wild fuming notion that resistlessly bore him on. Let all else go to glory: there before him lay the road to Glann.

So, on along the silent road, between the sleeping hedges, James went hurrying; pressing on like one possessed, stumbling now and staggering, running now and panting, muttering at times between his teeth, or cursing volubly, or calling upon that blaggard of a Jem to wait for him. It was nearing two o'clock when he left Bilboa; it was half past two when he passed the clock in Bunn market-house, turned through the Diamond and went tramping down Main street; by three he was rid of the town again and far out among the hedges. He met not a soul, heard or heeded nothing; had no thought of time or of loneliness, hardly turned his head when a dog came rushing. Through the long avenue of firs he went; rounded the shores of Sheila lake; passed safely through the wastes of bog-land and came again to the sheltering hills; dragged on past Moira chapel, toiled wearily up Lunny's brae, came at last to Willow-bridge (which stands halfway between

Glann and Bunn), and there stopped. Poteen was dead in him. Sleep was imperious, nature exhausted. He stumbled to a doorstep, sank against the door; and blessedly slept.

IV

ABOUT seven o'clock Dan Willis of Moira, a man who many times had travelled to Emo with cattle and horses, left his cart, crossed Willow-bridge street and shook James Daly awake.

"What are ye doin' there?" he shouted. "Are ye for the fair? Wake up—wake up."

Blinking and staring, James sat upright on the doorstep; looked at Dan, at the whitewashed wall beside him, at the sidewalk; rubbed his eyes, wet his lips, looked up again. "Where am I?" said he. "What—what—where am I at all?"

"You're in Willow-bridge. . . . What the devil's up wi' ye? . . . How did ye come here?"

James shook his head slowly; set elbows on knees and face in hands; looked at his boots and fell to groping for himself in the hazy back-ways of thought.

"How did ye come here? . . . What made ye go to sleep there? . . . Are ye for the fair?"

Stiffly James rose, shivering the while and moistening his lips. His tongue was swollen, his throat parched; every bone in him cried out. "I am," answered he. "I—I tried to walk an' couldn't. 'Twas too far. I got beat on the road . . . I'll—I'll be for home, I'm thinkin'."

"Home? Back to Emo an' you within sight of Glann a'most! Man, you're mad . . . Come on to the cart here an' I'll give ye a lift."

"I'm thankful to ye, but—" James stood considering. "All right, then. Sure I may as well."

Five miles over a rough road in a springless cart, an hour's botheration with questions which he tried to evade and answers which he had to give, left James altogether awake if still groping in search of his old harmonious self. Most of his own questions he had answered, part of the way before him lay plain to his eyes; still remained sore bones, parched throat, the dregs of foolishness, the pricks and stings of conscience, the dull aching of regret. Between him and home lay thirteen miles Irish, in his pocket was fifteen pence sterling; he felt like a whipped dog . . . but he was out in the world at last.

In the kitchen of Nolan's eating-house he warmed his blood, made a breakfast of strong tea, smoked a pipe; then, feeling refreshed, made the most of his tatters and boldly issued upon the sidewalks. He had still ninepence, the day was fine, the fair in swing; let worrying go to glory, said James Daly, and boldly faced the world.

He went down Main street, strolling in the sunshine and deigning to return the salutations of one here and there upon the sidewalk; sauntered through the market and made note of the latest quotations in fodder and eggs; had a morning glass with a friend and another with himself and a friend; took stock of the shops, bought half an ounce of tobacco and a new pipe, spent

a while among the standings and apple stalls; turned uphill to the fair-green and paraded it like a magistrate, hands under coat-tails and hat cocked on an eye; helped in a bargain or two, made note of this and that, then lighted his pipe and leisurely made for the horse-fair. Like any gentleman James strolled at his ease, glorying in the big sunshine of the world. Emo was far away, hundreds of miles away, and Anne mourning in the cabin, and Mike toiling at the digging. Emo and Rhamus; Anne and Mike; toil and trouble? To glory with them!

The horse-fair was not yet at its height but dealing had long begun. Big, red-faced men (black Saxons from Manchester these) in cords and leggings went in and out, saying little and seeing much, judging a horse at a glance, pricing him in a twinkle. Farmers, jockeys, agents (among them, you may be sure, the tattered figure of one James Daly) trudged up and down from group to group; scattered back when a horse came plunging along the roadway, or a mare backed upon the sidewalk; shouted, blustered, swore, bargained with a rare vigour of language and gesture, flung insult and scorn with brutal freedom, and jests that smote. The air reeked with the savour of stables; the confusion and hubbub were bewildering; horses and men alike seemed possessed of some demon of unrest.

Midway down the street, right in thick of the fair, James Daly of a sudden pulled hands from pockets, shrunk against a wall and stood peering at the figure of a tall young fellow in dark tweeds who went showing the paces of a black horse. His face was flushed, his

clothes were splattered with mud; he looked weary, ran heavily. It was Jem himself.

Master Jem? The Paddy horse? So James had guessed right after all. Think of that now, and think of forgetting all about the boy! But what was he doing? asked James of himself, and stood peering through the crowd. Surely the Master had never sent him to Glann to sell a horse? No, no; never would the Master think of such a thing. Then—then A sudden flash of perception shone in upon James, quick and shrewdly thought worked, memory lent its aid; and in a minute he knew all, in a minute too had shaken off the robe of folly and stepped back into the tatters of his old faithful self. "Aw, Master Jem, Master Jem," thought he, "is that what you'd be doin'?" Ah, but it's well I minded me 'twas Glann fair-day; sure but it's well"

What to do? He must act warily. To force things were to ruin them. The lad was tired and hungry, was excited and cross: a wrong word and all was spoilt. What to do? If only James could have a quiet talk with him; if only someone James knew would buy the horse; if only Another inspiration flashed upon James; and turning sharply he went running through the crowd. And as he ran, one of the crowd, a big man with a brown beard, stood watching him in a doorway.

Ten minutes' search found the man James wanted—the man Dan Willis of Moira, who that morning had carried him from Willow-bridge to Glann. "Come here, Dan," said James pulling at his sleeve; "come away wi' me Ye see that black horse yonder;

well, go an' buy it from the young man that's with it. You'll know who he is; but niver heed. Give him what he axes, an Ah, hold your tongue till I'm finished. Give him what he axes, I tell ye; take the horse to Nolan's yard; tell him to meet ye for the money in Nolan's parlour, an' leave the rest to me Arrah, whisht wi' ye, I say. Man alive, I know what I'm about. *I'll pay the money, I'll meet him an' pay.* I've got it here in me pocket. I tell ye I was sent to buy the horse Whisht, Dan; whisht. Listen to me, then: Yon's the young Master, an' yon's the Paddy horse, an'"

Ten minutes afterwards Dan led the Paddy horse into Nolan's yard, lingered a while in the stable; then, just as Jem went climbing to Nolan's parlour, slipped out upon the street—and met the Master.

V

NOLAN's parlour was a big room, bare, ill-lighted, furnished for the day with rough tables, rickety forms and a few chairs. It smelt of peat-smoke and damp and bad whisky; its aspect was cheerless. On a table was a tray; on the tray a glass of whisky; by the table sat James Daly.

At sound of Jem's foot upon the stairs, James rose, plucked at his neckband, crossed to the window. The door opened. Jem came in. James turned.

"Ho, ho, Master Jem—ho, ho. An' is that yourself now? Well, well. Now, who the divil'd have im-

agined I was goin' to see yourself when I looked round? Sure——"

Jem had stopped by the door, surprise and suspicion quick on his face; now he came quickly forward and stopped again near the table. "What are ye doin' here, James Daly?" he asked, loudly and fiercely. "Who sent ye here? What d'ye want?"

James looked at his glass, and nodded. "Just that," said he.

"What brought ye to Glann?" cried Jem, stepping nearer. "What brought ye, I say?"

James rubbed his chin. "Well, part o' the way it was me feet, an'——"

Up went Jem's hand. "By the Lord above, I'll— Answer me, Daly," he shouted; "answer me quick! What brought ye to Glann, I say?"

"I followed ye, Master Jem."

"Ye followed me. An' why?" Anger was black on the lad's face, big in his voice. "An' why?" he shouted.

James flinched not a step. "I dunno," he answered. "Somethin'—be it the divil, or be it the drink—sent me, an' so I followed ye."

"It's a lie. Ye do know. It's a lie, sir. You're spyin' on me." James shook his head. "Then why are ye here?" James kept silent. "Why are ye here, I say?" shouted Jem again.

A moment James hesitated, a moment stood weighing his courage; then looked up boldly and answered. "'Twas to pay ye for a horse, Master Jem—a horse that Dan Willis of Moira bought from ye a while ago."

Jem stood speechless, brimming with amazement. James moved back a step, drew a long breath, went on: " 'Twas pure chance, Master Jem, that I seen ye last night. God himself knows what made me follow ye. I knew this was Glann fair-day; I knew . . . Och, 'twas pure chance. An' God himself knows that when I seen ye in the street yonder I could hardly believe me eyes. I—I——"

James stopped, moved away another step. Jem stood silent, breathing fast and heavily.

" Ah, but sure ye wouldn't do it," pleaded James, with a sudden change of manner; " sure ye wouldn't disgrace your name."

Again James stopped. Jem said not a word, but passion was mastering him. " I couldn't see ye doin' it—I couldn't let ye . . . "

Again James stopped, again moved back a step; then looked Jem in the eyes and stretched a hand. " Do what ye like with me, Master Jem; do what ye like. I'm tellin' ye the truth. I dunno what ye think——"

" Think? Ye lyn' cur! What business is it o' yours? What right have ye to come interferin'? By God, I could kill ye!" Hoarse with passion, his eyes glowing, Jem rushed at James, took him by the throat and swung him round against a table. " You'd follow me? You'd spy on me? By God, I'll kill ye!" Chairs and forms went flying; the table clattered down; here and there the feet went scuffling: outside, someone came up the stairs, opened the door and stopped at the threshold. " I'll show ye, Daly. I'll teach ye your place." Another table went over, another form. James strug-

gled and pleaded; Jem shouted and fought, swung James up and down . . . dropped his arms at last and stood looking towards the doorway.

In the sudden silence that came feet were heard upon the stairs. The Master turned, spoke a word or two; then came in, closed the door, crossed to a table, seated himself upon it and folded his arms. Jem had moved back to the wall. James stood panting by the window.

"That was a desperate scuffle, boys." The Master spoke in his most everyday voice. He looked at James and laughed. "It's a pity Anne can't see you now, James," he said drily. "Faith, she'd admire you. What have you been doing to bring this upon yourself?"

James fumbled with his open waistcoat, looked at Jem and grinned. "Aw, bedad, sir, that's a question. Sure—sure— Aw, now, 'twas only a wee differ Master Jem an' meself were havin'."

"I know." The Master nodded and glanced at Jem; sat further back on the table, looked slyly at James. "Mebbe 'twas over the price of a horse you differed?" he said.

James looked at Jem. Jem stood eyeing the Master. Neither moved nor spoke. The Master laid his stick upon the table.

"I hear it's a good fair," he said, quite casually. "Stock are up, and horses I see are sellin' well. I was late gettin' in—but that couldn't be helped. 'Twas only when I got to Bunn that I decided to come at all."

A pause came. Still James stood looking at Jem; still Jem stood eyeing the Master.

"I met Dan Willis of Moira outside," the Master

went on, "and he tells me he's bought a horse very dear. He says he gave thirty pounds for it without a luck penny. That's dear—mighty dear for an ould cart horse. I went with him to see it and——"

Jem stepped from the wall. "Enough of this," he said. "James, out ye go." James crossed for his hat, slouched out and closed the door. Jem went back to the wall, leant against it and folded his arms. He was breathing quickly; but his eyes met the Master's with a stare of defiance.

"Say what you're goin' to say an' have done with it."

"Say?" The Master sat back on the table, elbow in one hand, chin in the other, a forefinger lying between his lips; his brows were bent and beneath them he watched Jem with eyes that searched and read. "Say?" He paused; his forefinger working upon his lips. "What is there to say?"

"What ye like. I don't care a button. You've caught me"—again that stare of defiance—"an' I don't care."

"Don't you?" The Master nodded. His words came drily. He sat grave and quiet, and his eyes were deep.

"No; not a button. I'd do it again. It's not my fault. I had no other way."

The Master's finger pressed tighter upon his lips; Jem, whipped to sudden anger by his silence, moved from the wall and broke out passionately: "Ye drove me to it—ye drove me to it. A thousand times I've said to ye: Give me money an' let me go. An' ye wouldn't. No, ye wouldn't! You'd keep me at home—"

you'd shut me up like a dog in a kennel—you'd make me spend my life in the fields, drudgin' like a slave Ye drove me to it, I say. Yesterday's work finished it. It's your own doin' I did my best," cried the lad; "I did my best An' now—" Jem paused, his hands fell.

"Yes?" Again the Master nodded. "And now?"

"I'll go." Jem came forward, hands clenched, head back and eyes gleaming. "I'll go in spite of ye. Ye may take me back; ye may do what ye like: but I'll go in spite of ye." The lad's voice rang out boldly; as if braced to meet the world he stood before his father clothed with the insolence of youth. "I said yesterday I'd go; an' I'll go in spite of ye."

"I know." The Master paused a breath. "You'd go even as a thief?"

"I'm no thief. I deny it. What if I did take the horse? What if I did mean to sell it an' keep the money? Haven't I earnt it all? Would the price of three horses pay me for all the work I've done for ye? Would it, I say?"

The Master sat silent, pressing a forefinger against his lips; having, strange to tell, sorrow heavier on his heart than anger.

"Ah, ye know it wouldn't." The lad's voice swelled loud and scornful. "An' yet ye call me a thief! A thief? Then why did ye drive me to it? Why didn't ye give me money long ago an' let me go? Why didn't ye, I say?"

Still the Master kept silence. What indeed was there to say? *Why didn't you let me go?* Can any man look

child of his in the eyes and dare venture answer to that?

"But no. Ye wouldn't listen to me. You'd keep me at home. You'd bully me an' drive me. You'd work me to death. You'd talk, an' talk, an' talk; an' I wanted no talk. I was sick of it. I wanted only to get away, to get out an' away—away out into the world. . . . Ah, can't ye see," cried the lad spreading his arms; "can't ye see?"

"Yes." The Master sighed; dropped his eyes and sat looking at the floor. He saw only too well; had seen maybe for long enough. Only—only— Well, fathers are foolish creatures; and somehow delight not in casting their children upon the world. "Yes," said the Master, sighing heavily; "I see."

"And I'll go yet." Again came that ringing cry of insolent youth. "Ye may take me back, ye may do what ye like; but I'll go yet."

Then the Master looked up. "It's the best thing you can do," he said.

"What!"

"You can have money," said the Master quietly.

Jem had not a word.

"You can go when you like." The Master slipped from the table, turned for his stick. "Only," added he, "maybe your mother would like to bid you good-bye."

His mother might like to bid him good-bye. Just a breath of sentiment, just a few simple words spoken quietly and simply: but how the words whipped Jem's blood, and how the reproach of them beat upon his heart! A score of times had he stood before the Mas-

ter taking reproof and admonition and command with sullen obduracy; now, at last, in sight of his freedom and on the very threshold of the world, he stood humbled and softened, conquered by a phrase that struck at his heart. Just a word or two, just a look and a word: and behold, at last, the lad as wax in the Master's hand. Anger died in him and bitterness; the cloak of his insolence fell in the dust. Emotion surged full in him. A yearning for home and for all at home—for everyone and everything, for his mother and sister, for the big kitchen and Tim the dog lying by the hearth, for the fields, even, and the hills and the peasants toiling upon them—swept in and mastered him. His lips began quivering. A lump rose in his throat. Tears welled up. He turned to the window, biting at his lip; leant against the frame and stood fighting himself turned at last with a quick sound of sobbing. "Father," he said. "Father! I'll go home—I'll go home. . . ."

Sometime during that afternoon, about a mile on the Glann side of Bunn town, a youth riding a black horse overtook an elderly man, who, hat far back on his head, one arm swinging and his coat across the other, went trudging the dust. One looked at the other; nodded; laughed.

"So that's yourself, James?"

"Ay, troth, Master Jem—what's left o' me."

"An' you're for home, James?"

"Och, ay. Strugglin' for home."

"Back again to the slavery, an' the mud cabin, an' the diggin' at the rotten praties?"

"Ay, indeed." James laughed and drew a sleeve across his brow. "Och, ay. Aw, to be sure."

"Aw, to be sure, indeed." The two kept silent a minute, their eyes fixed upon the long ribbon of road. "An' tell me, James—are ye glad to be goin' home?"

"Glad?" James looked up. "Well God knows I am, Master Jem—gladder nor all in the world."

"I know." A smile came to Jem's face, flitted there, and died. Another minute passed silently. James shifted his coat from this arm to that, glanced up at Jem, looked across the hedge; came nearer to the Paddy horse and spoke.

"I say, Master Jem. Listen to me now. What about yourself? Is it for home you are too?"

"Ay, indeed." Jem laughed, mimicking James' speech. "Och, ay. Aw, to be sure."

"Ay? An' listen to me." James came nearer. "Is it glad yourself'll be?"

"Glad?" Jem looked down into James' eyes, smiled; then drew himself up in the saddle. "By the king, James, I'm as happy as a bird! It's all right, me son; it's all right. I'm goin'—I'm goin'! Glad? Ah, by the livin' king, I could fly!"

He gave the reins a stroke, skirled wildly, waved his cap and went off cantering between the hedges. And as he went the long road was a primrose path before him; a path going fair and straight for home—and for the big world that lay shining beyond it.



THE HERD



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I

IT was a blustering day in early March; a day of racing clouds and fickle gleams of sunshine, a merry day, a hopeful day, a day that came shouting to men a glad promise of spring. You could feel it in the air, that message of life and mystery. It was in the wind, the sunshine, the rush of the clouds; you could smell it, see it, open your arms and crush it to yourself; it cried up to you from the sopping fields, piped to you in the naked hedges; it was there—and there—and there, mysterious, intangible, certain as life itself, the first flush and quiver of things on the face of a waking world. But only a flush, a message: for old Winter still reigned in the land.

It was of spring that the Master was thinking that day, as slowly he went splashing along the Curleck road down from Emo towards Kilfad and the shore; of spring, and work, and the ordering of things. His thoughts ran slowly, soberly, prosaically. That quiver of things made no turmoil in his heart, no ferment in his blood; his feet went heavily through rut and puddle; no vain beauty of sky or mountain tempted him to raise head and look out across the hedges; soberly he walked along, hands clasped behind him, beard sweeping his breast, mind busy with thoughts of work—grim, unending work, and of spring—clean life-giving spring, with its gifts of sunshine and leaves, and warmth and

hope, and long days of fierce unresting labour. The winter had been hard and weary, the rains long and persistent; for months and months had the fields lain dead and the hills stood barren: but now, thought the Master, now spring was coming. He knew it. Instinct, feeling, something in the air, in himself, told him. He knew it. A few days more of bluster and sunshine, and the fields would be dry, the roads firm, spades busy, work going steadily. . . . Involuntarily, the Master raised his head, flung back his shoulders, quickened his steps and to the merry lilt of a tune went splashing on his way.

He went through the oak plantation, crossed the Cur-rach bridge (against the tumbled parapet of which, you may remember, George Lunny once leant his stilts whilst he looked at the moon), splattered through the puddles that lay darkly between the willow hedges; came presently to a gateway and, turning his back on Thrasna river, took to the fields—his own fields, the fields of Kilfad, famous from Gorteen to Bunn town for their grass and their mushrooms.

Along the pasture he went, whence sprang rushes three feet high from land that sagged to the foot like a filled sponge; skirted the Round hill (beyond which are Curleck woods and the home of Bessie Bredin); picked his way through a trampled gap, up a winding path, and coming to the crest of a slope there paused, turned, stood weighing his coat-tails and slowly sweeping the land with a long steady gaze.

The fields were empty, lying there among the hedges in their dull garb of winter, heavy and soaked to the

lip. Not a beast moved within eye-shot, not a bird in a quickset; only a hay-rack standing far up the hillside, and the cluck of fowls round Jordan's cottage, gave evidence that life ran anywhere on Kilfad. Everything lay fallow, dreary, dead, thought the Master and looked out towards Gorteen and the long gleam of the mountain; everything, everywhere—the fields, hills, hedges, the grass, the trees, the houses even—lay there in the sunshine, dead and waiting for spring. For spring? Ah, yes; for the blessed spring, thought the Master; then turning again went on through the rushes and came to the cottage of Jordan the herd.'

A long, low house it was, built of stone and white-washed; having a doorway in its middle, a small window on either side, and a single chimney springing from the thatch. Nakedly it stood upon the field, a lean-to at this end, a pig-sty at that; behind, a long narrow byre, a little pile of turf, a low butt of hay; here a hedge, there a row of poplars; in front, a trampled street, noisome and sprinkled with starveling fowls: no garden plot, not a shrub or a plant, not a rag behind the windows, not a step even at the threshold, nothing anywhere but the chimney reek and the chickens in the mud to show that anything but beasts of the field had here found a home. Nothing but these and a very human sound of squalling that came with the smoke out through the doorway.

Sniffing and frowning, the Master crossed the street; came to the doorway and raised his voice. "Anyone at home?" he shouted. No answer came; none but a sudden hush within and a clatter among the stools. The

Master came nearer, peered between the doorposts, called again. "Are you there, Henry? Are you at home, Ellen?"

Still no answer; then, in a minute, the soft fall of bare feet on the clay floor, a quick parting of the smoke-curtain, and there on the threshold—bare-legged and bare-armed, hair in wisps, face pale and worn, in her arms a baby, beside her and clutching at her tattered cotton skirt a flock of children—stood the figure of a girl. Not a word she said, not a sound came from the children; as if by magic the group appeared from the smoke and stood there motionless by the threshold.

The Master looked at them, sideways under his brushy eyebrows; then grunted and nodded at the girl.

"Oh, it's you, Jinny?" said he.

"Yis, sir." The girl's voice was soft, very timorous.

"You're not at school then, to-day?"

"No, sir."

"And why not?"

"I—I— Please, sir, I had to mind the childer."

The Master grunted again; looked towards the fields, caught his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, turned again to Jinny.

"I know," he said. "And where's your father?"

"Please, sir, gone across the land with the billhook."

"I know. And where's your mother, Jinny?" asked the Master, looking full at the girl, both voice and manner curt with meaning.

The girl's eyes fell. She shifted the baby from this arm to that; flushed; looked up. "Gone to town," she

answered haltingly, as from the verge of tears. "She's—she's gone to town."

The Master nodded. A grim look came to his face; his eyes grew stern.

"To town," growled he; then, with a glance at the girl, "And you're left here by yourself, Jinny? Left to mind the children?"

She shrank back a step into the curtain of smoke, and the flock of solemn-eyed children with her; shrank back, softly and silently, into the blue depths of the smoke. And as she went the curtain closed, her face went out, and her voice came murmuring. "Ah, yes, sir," it came; "ah, yes. But—sure—sure . . ."

The Master buttoned his coat; bent his head and entered the cabin. Before him the children scattered back, like rabbits from a keeper, and went scuttling through the pots and pans, the baskets and stools, which cumbered the floor. Jinny turned and ran, laid the baby in a box that stood in a corner, snatched up a chair, wiped it with a corner of her skirt and placed it by the hearth. Peering here and there through the drifting smoke—at the litter of a dresser, the chaos of a table—his head almost touching the rafters, his bigness looming giant-like in the little room, his feet wandering uncertainly over the floor, the Master crossed the kitchen, turned on the hearth, and stood with his back to the pots and the fire, face towards Jinny and the chair.

"No—no," he said, with a wave of his hand. "I won't be sitting, Jinny. I want to— When did she go?" he asked.

"Is it mother, sir?"

"Yes."

"'Twas—" Jinny hesitated; moved away a little; stood fidgeting with her skirt.

"'Twas a good while ago—after breakfast time—'bout ten o'clock mebbe."

"Yes?" The Master pulled up the chair, sat down with his arms resting on its back and his cheek in his hand. "Don't be afraid, Jinny," he said, his voice softening. "Come. Be a woman. And how did she go?" he went on, as Jinny looked up.

"On Bredin's jinnet an' cart, sir."

"I see." The Master paused a moment. "And she went by herself, Jinny?"

"No No, sir."

"Oh. How's that?" The Master's tone of surprise seemed forced. "Who was it went with her, Jinny?"

"Please, sir—" Jinny stopped. A minute of silence fell. Not a sound came from the scattered children, cowering somewhere back in nooks and corners; not a whimper from the baby in its box. "Please, sir—" She stopped again.

"Yes, Jinny Well? Tell me, Jinny Was it anyone I know?"

"Yes—yes, sir." A pause. "'Twas—" Another pause; then suddenly: "'Twas Black Ned from beyont the lough."

And at that Jinny put face in hands and fell to sobbing.

The Master sat gripping his beard and looking sternly towards the doorway. He had heard only what he had expected to hear; still "The hussy," he mut-

tered to himself. How could she? What kind was she? "Oh, the tinker," muttered the Master; then turned quickly to Jinny. "But what's this?" he said. "What's this I hear? Come over to me, Jinny. What are you crying about?" asked the Master, and took the child by an arm. "What is there to cry about? Your mother will be back, you know. Maybe she's nearly back now . . ."

"It's not that," sobbed Jinny. "Oh, it's not that."

"Then what, Jinny? Tell me."

"What brings him here," cried the child. "What does he want? He's—he's always here. Couldn't he leave us alone? Ah, I hate him—I hate him," cried Jinny through her sobs. "I hate the face of him—an' the sight of him—an' the voice of him. I dunno—I dunno what it is; but— Ah, he means no good. I know it, I know it," sobbed Jinny; nor could the Master sitting there in his wisdom give back to the child so much as a word. "The hussy," was all he could say; "oh, the tinker." And so silence fell.

Presently, from the corners came a sound of stifled sobbing, from the box a voice that waxed swiftly to clamour and fury; Jinny ceased sobbing and stood looking at her hands; the Master woke suddenly to a perception of things, pushed back his hat and rose.

"Heigho," he sighed; then stepped from the hearth. "What's all this I hear, boys?" he called cheerily towards the nooks and corners. "Come, come; that's a poor noise to be making. Jinny's not crying; are you, Jinny?" He took her by the arm, led her to the door-

way, and turned her face to his. "Never mind," he said; "be brave, Jinny. Do the best you can. Your mother will be home soon; if I meet her I'll hurry her. She must go to town sometimes, you know Anyhow, don't fret; and come up to Emo one of these days for an old dress or something I heard the mistress talking about. Come now—cheer up—and away in like a girl and see to the baby. Run now."

"I will, sir—I will."

"That's a girl." And the Master went.

Turning towards the lake, he went through the fields, over the Round hill, across a footstick, and striking the Curleck road made towards Emo. His feet dragged heavily, his eyes sought the road. "The jade," he muttered at times; and again, "The tinker"; and again, "God help them all!" Very busy were his thoughts: but not now did they turn to work, or cattle, or the coming of spring.

Right at foot of the hill, where the road curves away from the river, sights the willows and makes straight for the Currach bridge; just there the Master stopped, raised his head and stood listening—with hands clasped behind him, shoulders slack and head twisted from the river, stood listening to an irregular thud of chopping, broken and smothered by a sullen roar of coughing, that came to him across the hedge. A minute he stood in the roadway, motionless and hearkening; then, groaning aloud as if in pain, mounted the ditch, put hands round mouth and shouted into the wind.

"Henry—Henry." The sound of chopping ceased.

"Henry—Henry." The sound of coughing came clearer. With his head bent to the wind, the Master stood on the ditch steadily eyeing the figure that came towards him across the grass.

A middle-aged man he was, big of bones and body, but woefully meagre of flesh, his eyes burning bright, face brick-red, a tatter of whiskers on his cheeks and iron-gray stubble on his chin. He wore tattered cord trousers, a sleeved moleskin waistcoat and a brown felt hat; from knee to boot his legs were wound about with ropes twisted from hay, round his neck was a long woolen muffler; his hands were chapped and scratched, his lips blue and dry, through the open front of his cotton shirt you had sight of his naked chest. Slowly, awkwardly, one foot listlessly dragging after the other, this long arm swinging by his side, the other curled round the haft of a billhook, he came along the hillside; stopped before the Master and raised his eyes.

"Good evenin'," he said, with a nod. "It's brave weather."

"It is, Henry," answered the Master. "What are you doing over there?"

"I was hedgin'," came back, slowly, gruffly; "clearin' the briars. The ditch was choked," said the man after a pause; and again, "I wanted somethin' for the fire." He let the billhook slide through his arm, fixed the blade between his feet, leant his chest upon the haft and stood looking at the grass.

"Briars make bad firing, Henry," said the Master, looking towards the little pile of bramble that lay by a ditch out in the field.

"The worst," came back. "But they're better than nothin'."

"No turf, Henry?"

"Next to none."

"No sticks?"

"Sorrow a stick."

The man's manner was listless, slow, weary. He spoke with an effort, wasting not a word. His gaze across the field was bovine in its steady contemplativeness. From time to time he shook from head to heel with a paroxysm of coughing.

"Can you do nothing for *that*, Henry?" asked the Master at last, with a jerk of his head and a look at the heaving chest.

"I've tried iverything."

"Been to the doctor lately?"

"I have."

"Well?"

"He said I'd make a fine ould man with a new pair o' bellows in me."

"Ah!" The Master pursed his lips, shook his head; looked away. "Wouldn't it be wise, Henry, to get a button on that shirt and wear a coat?"

"I dunno. Mebbe it might."

Nothing seemed of interest to the man. He stood there leaning on his billhook, just answering and coughing, waiting seemingly for nothing in the world but word to go.

"I've been beyond at the house, Henry," said the Master again. "I wanted to see you."

"Ay."

"I—I suppose the cattle are thriving?"

"They're doin' well—all but that red heifer. She's only donny."

"I know. And—I must come to see her. Yes." Somehow the Master seemed ill at ease. He had the air of one who beats about the bush. Then Henry turned.

"Ye say ye didn't see her when ye were over?" he questioned, wonderingly. "Ye passed them by an' niver looked at them!"

The Master stood accused. Never before in his life had he passed through Kilfad and not taken stock of all that lived upon it.

"I did," he answered. "I—I forgot. But—" He paused; then plunged. "Do you think it's wise, Henry, to leave those children over there by themselves—there with Jinny? Something might happen them . . ."

Henry pondered, still leaning upon the bill haft.

"There might," he said, with a jerk of his head. "An' there mightn't," he added slowly.

"The children were crying, Henry," the Master continued, probing cautiously and watchfully. "Jinny came when I called. I went in." He stopped. Henry nodded; coughed; kept silent. "There was no one there but Jinny," said the Master. Henry stood gazing impassively at the hillside. The Master was foiled. "I suppose Ellen was out looking for firing?" he said, casually and with a smack of the ironical.

Again Henry nodded; pondered; spoke. "Mebbe she was," said he.

"Or gone fishing?"

“ Ay, indeed.”

“ Or gone in Bredin’s cart to town.”

“ Mebbe so,” came back—that and not another word.

The Master wheeled away with a laugh and stood looking out across the big meadow towards Bilboa. He felt beaten, thwarted, puzzled. As well might he have talked to the ditch, or shouted at the Crockan there beyond the river. He had tried hints, insinuations; had been gentle, sympathetic, rough in the end and plain as a pikestaff: and all without avail. Nothing could touch the man. He was like wood. Something—trouble, or pain, or mortal sickness—had laid callous grip upon him, had blighted and left him joyless as a stricken tree. Had he feelings? Did he think? Did he know? Did he care for his children; had he fear for himself; did it matter to him a straw that Ellen his wife had gone elsewhere than for firing? Did he know; or was he ignorant; or had sickness numbed him; or was he only hiding behind this mask of indifference? The Master was puzzled. What was he to do, or say, or think? asked he of himself; and in answer found a great pity swell in his heart, rise and go out rushing towards that battered figure of a man. Pity? Oh, surely a dog must have given him that!

“ Henry, Henry,” cried the Master, “ go home to your bed. Man, you’re not fit to be out. Go home and let Jinny give you something to eat, and get to your bed I’ll send you something. I’ll send for the doctor”

Henry turned his eyes, slowly, almost contemptuously.

"I want no doctor," he said. "There's nothin' ailin' me, nothin' but a bit of a cowl'd."

"Well go home, then, to the fire," pleaded the Master. "Do, Henry, like a man."

"I'm goin'," said Henry, and straightened his back, and pulled his hook from the clay, and stepped for his ditch; "I'm goin' when I'm finished. Yes."

II

THE Master left the ditch and took again to the road. Soberly he trudged along, nor lifted his eyes from the stones at his feet. The day kept good; wind sporting, clouds speeding gaily, the sun flashing as he fell for the mountain; but in the day or its beauties the Master had no pleasure, had not even an eye, right or left across the willows, for the wide-spreading fields. Not often before in broad day had he walked blindly from Kilfad gate to the Currach bridge; never before, maybe, walked in greater turmoil of heart. He felt anxious, distressed; a hand of gloom was between him and the sun; he had a sense of foreboding; always before him, there between the ruts at his feet, stood that weary figure of a man, that unfortunate of a Henry The poor life-crushed creature! Surely life was for him a pitiless burden; death the sweetest mercy he might implore. Death—death—death? Was it coming—coming quick with the gathering months? The unfortunate of a man! Something must be done for him; something for those helpless children, that weary drudge of a

Jinny. Something—but what? Something—but how? Help might be given them, bread, clothing, fire; but who might save them from themselves, their fate, their shame? “Oh, the hussy,” cried the Master within himself; “the jade.” Why had he not long ago hunted her from the land, driven her out to seek her kind. She was a disgrace. The countryside reeked of the scandal of her doings. Her name was a by-word in the land, herself a pollution. And in his land? His! Oh, but this must end it, cried the Master, this day must end it all; then, in a flare of indignation, rounded a bend of the road, faced Emo hill and there before him was the woman herself. And with her the man her companion.

In a narrow red and blue cart, drawn by a jennet, they came slowly down; the man driving, the woman seated by him on a plank that stretched across from edge to edge of the sideboards. The woman wore a brown shawl, black dress, large straw bonnet with long strings and a single blue flower; her face was big, heavy, flushed, with a low forehead and thick loose lips. The man was dressed in tweed trousers and waistcoat, a blue coat, brown hat and faded black and white necktie; he had a bad face, square, lowering, with narrow eyes that gleamed viciously. Both sat crouched over their knees, heads and hands forward, their bodies swaying in and out as the cart jolted. They looked sullen, dissipated. Not a word passed between them. At sight of the Master coming uphill they sat upright; the woman with hands spread on her knees and lips a-quiver, the man plucking viciously at the reins and prodding the

jennet with a stick. "Gwan," he shouted, with a prod; "gwan to blazes out o' that."

The Master's first impulse counselled his standing aside to let them pass; his second, born at closer sight of their faces, drove him to the middle of the road and left him standing there, legs spraddled, jaws set, thumbs hooked in the armholes of his waistcoat.

"Gwan," shouted the man, with a slash and an oath; "gwan to blazes out o' that"; then, to the Master, "Is it run over ye want to be? Stan' aside, then, or be the holy I'll level ye."

The Master stood firm; raised a hand. "Stop," he called. The cart came on. "Stop," shouted the Master; "stop, I say."

The man glared at him; then rose to his feet, storming and cursing.

"Stop," he roared; "ye tell me to stop! Ye dare order me . . ." The woman pulled at his coat-tails, crying him to be quiet. He turned upon her, his arm crooked as if to strike, his jaw set brutally. "You—you—" he shouted; then, turning suddenly, and with a storm of oaths, drew himself up and with all his strength smote the jennet twice across its back. The animal started, jumped; plunged forward. Just in time the Master sprang aside. "*Whirroo-whirroo*," roared the man, with a skirl and a twirl; the woman cried, pleaded, caught at his arms; the cart swerved, went clattering down the hill, swaying this side, jolting that, missing destruction at times by inches: so whirled round the corner, into the plantation, and was gone.

A while the Master stood on the wayside, rigid and

quiet, with eyes looking steadily downhill; then, a sudden passion of anger rising within him, stepped out upon the road and went striding after the cart.

"That's it," he said; "that's it? Oh, I'll show them. They dare—they dare—Oh, I'll teach them Out she goes—out she goes if I have to clear the house. The hussy. The jade If I can only come upon them; if I can only find that scoundrel in the house," cried the Master, and strode blindly between the willows. He was very wroth. His face was aflame, his hands hung clenched. To be scorned, insulted on his own roadway; spurned by carrion like that? Oh, he'd teach them a lesson for evermore

He saw the cart turn in from the road and go clanking slowly across the rushy field, the woman still seated upon it, the man walking by the donkey's head; saw it come to the trampled gap, saw the man flounder and fall, rise and fall: and seeing that the Master's anger cooled suddenly, and he stopped, bent his head and stood considering. This was a foolish business, he told himself; he was only wasting good breath and anger in chasing the wind. The man was drunk; the woman was drunk; she had tried to restrain the fellow; clearly, thought the Master, he had done wisely had he stepped aside and let them pass. Their business was none of his; they were hopeless and shameless: let them go, let them go But what of Henry? Of the children? Of little Jinny at home? Think of that child there in the smoke, shivering and hungering, waiting for she knew not what. Think of her feelings when she saw her mother stumble

in, saw who was with her, saw them sit there all the evening, drinking and singing, fighting and . . . Oh, shame, shame, thought the Master; then passed the gateway, and went up the fields, and came to Henry the herd toiling patiently with his billhook on top of the hill. Not a moment did the Master waste.

"Look here, Henry," said he, catching him by the shoulder; "I told you to go home. Why haven't you gone? Come! No more nonsense; but go. Take up your bundle, I say, and go. You hear me?" said the Master, sternly and sharply.

Henry turned slowly. His eyes held a gleam of wonderment. "I do," he answered. "I do."

"Well go, then. And look here." The Master's voice took a less peremptory tone. "When you get home do your duty. You hear me? Be a man, I say, and do your duty. You hear me?" said the Master, and swayed Henry to and fro.

"I do," came back; "I do, sir."

"Then off with you. There, take your bundle of sticks. And now your billhook—maybe you'll want it at home. Come, come," said the Master as Henry turned again on the hillside and stood gravely eyeing him beneath his hat brim; "I want to see you moving."

"But sure——"

"I want no more words. I want you to be a man. I want you to go home. Come," ordered the Master; "take your billhook and go."

And without a word Henry turned, gave his bundle a hoist, tucked his billhook under his arm; and went trudging downhill towards home.

III

THAT night went, and the next day, another came and brought no sign; it was in the evening of that third day, the pitiless scourge of the rain having at last gone flying at burst of the sun, that the Master—now fallen somewhat anxious and curious not a little—turned once more from Emo gates and went down the Clackan road towards Kilfad. The road was deep. The hedges stood drenched and whipped upon the ditches, a diamond drop glistening on every thorn. Naked and gaunt rose the trees from rain-blanchèd fields—fields all sodden and dank, the grass upon them blue and beaten, the rushes drooping wearily. The hills shone, the valleys smoked in the sunshine, the lake glistened; over there, not a mile away you might think, stood the mountain, its face bright with a promise of coming rain. Rain? It was always raining, thought the Master. Spring? It was never coming—never. Look at the fields, the road, the floods; see the horizon bursting with rain; look at the world lying there in the sun, drowned in the eternal deluge. Ah, it was weary and hopeless, thought the Master, heart-breaking and hopeless; so, that mood of gloom lying black upon him, went through the plantation, and between the willows, and across the rushy bottom, and down along the path that led to Jordan's cottage. And as he went, down beneath the burden of his gloom, crept the haunting thought: *What did Henry do?*

Nothing moved about the house; nothing but the

smoke above the chimney and the fowls upon the street. The door was open; by the threshold stood a pot and basket; beneath the kitchen window Henry's billhook lay rusting on the chopping block. The billhook! Hurriedly, and with something like dread on his heart, the Master scattered the chickens and strode for the door.

"Hullo. Anyone at home?" No answer. "Henry—Henry. Are you there, Henry?" Still no answer. The Master stepped to the doorway, stooped, peered through the smoke; saw, in a minute, Henry by the hearth and the children round him, and he feeding them from a pot with their supper of porridge and milk. And seeing him the Master was glad; and he understood, and drew back, and waited patiently by the doorway, listening to the clink of spoon and bowl and idly watching the sky. Nor did the world seem altogether blank as he stood there, nor the spring altogether hopeless. For Henry's deeds, said he within himself, had not been desperate.

Presently the stools clattered back within, the children found their voices; across the floor Henry came clumping and issued from the smoke. He was bare-headed. His shirt sleeves were rolled to the elbows. Neck and chest were bare. His trousers were strapped about his knees, his naked feet showed within his unlaced boots. There was an ugly cut upon his forehead; one eye was blacked; his face, neck, chest were scratched and bruised. He looked flushed and hot; a little ashamed of his appearance.

"Well, Henry."

"Good evenin', sir."

"It's bad weather."

"The very worst."

"All well?"

"Ah, yes—iverything, thank God."

All this was pure trifling, beating for the hare. The Master turned.

"How are *you*, Henry?"

"Aw, the best." Henry coughed. "Sure I can't complain."

"Well you don't look the best." The Master eyed Henry's face and neck. "Has anything happened?"

"Ah, no." Henry paused. "Ah, no," he said again; "sorrow a thing."

The Master stood looking towards Emo. Henry leant a shoulder against the doorpost and stood rubbing his chin. Neither spoke for a minute; then, said the Master:

"Is Ellen inside?"

"She's not."

"Where is she?"

"She's gone—gone to see someone."

Henry was lying; and the Master knew it. Why was he lying?

"H'm. I know." The Master paused. "What did you do the other day, Henry, when I sent you home?"

"Do?" Henry stared. "Do," said he. "What would ye have me do?"

The Master looked narrowly at him; laughed; then stepped and brought the rusty billhook from the chopping block.

"Look here," said he; "I sent you home with this and I told you to do your duty. Did you do it?" Still Henry stared. "Did you?" repeated the Master.

"What's that?" came back. "Do what?"

"Did you use this"—the Master raised the billhook—"on the man you found in there?" He nodded towards the doorway; waited a minute for Henry's answer; turned and stood the billhook by the wall. "You weren't man enough to do it, Henry, I'm thinking," he said; "no, you weren't man enough."

Henry stood deep in thought, stolid, inscrutable as ever; then raised his eyes.

"Naw," he said; "naw, I wasn't."

"And why weren't you, may I ask?"

"Why?" Again Henry pondered. "Is it bloody murder you'd have me doin'?"

The Master could but laugh. It seemed all so absurd. Was the man knave or fool? He wheeled round and faced him.

"Look here, Henry," said he; "I don't understand you. If you're not playing with me you're doing something worse. Answer me this: Wasn't there a man inside there on Monday when you came home? Wasn't there?"

"There was."

"And wasn't Ellen there?"

"She was."

"And they had whisky—and were nearly drunk—and had just come from town?"

"Ay Yes Mebbe so."

"Well?" No answer. "Well, I say?" Still no

answer. The Master stamped his foot. "Come," said he, "enough of this. You must speak. I want to know what happened, and what you did. Come, sir."

The words were masterful, not to be denied. Slowly Henry moved his shoulder from the doorpost; stepped upon the street; stood looking across the fields. The wind flapped his flimsy shirt, stirred his hair. In the clearer light his face and neck showed thick with bruises.

"What is it I'm to say?" he asked, speaking slowly and plaintively and without turning his head.

"Just the truth. Just what you saw—what happened."

"I know." Henry turned, walked along the street; stopped at the end of the house with his face towards Emo. "It's the childer," he explained. "They seen enough; an' there's no use in them hearin' me." He stood blinking in the sunshine for a minute; then, abruptly and reluctantly, as one plunges when the water nips, began:

"When I got this far the jinnet an' cart was standin' there on the street. There was nobody with it an' no one about. I put down me billhook there on the block, takes me bundle an' goes in. Well, things were stirrin'. The childer were bleartin'—Jinny was cryin'—Black Ned was sittin' be the fire smokin' an' shoutin' at the childer—herself had her bonnet on her an' was gettin' tay. I takes no notice; but crosses an' throws me bundle in the corner; pulls over a stool and sits down. 'Twas all I could do. What could I do? Sure I was helpless. All I could manage was lift the child from

the box an' try to quiet it. An' sure th'others got quiet too when they seen me, an' Jinny came over an' took a stool beside me. So things weren't so bad—och, no. Only Ned was bleatherin'. He talked all kinds o' nonsense. He fair raved at times"

"About me, Henry?" asked the Master.

"Aw, it was. 'Twas foolishness. Sure he'd been at the drink. No matter, anyway." Henry pondered a while; moistened his lips; plunged again. "Herself didn't say much," he said, speaking very deliberately and as one might speak with his face to the stars; "she was—she was busy gettin' tay. Ay. It was a big spread. I accuse Ned must ha' bought it all, else—Ah, I accuse he must. There was bacon an' eggs on the pan; there was lashins o' tay; there was butter, an' white bread, an' a pot o' jam on the table—aw, there was plenty of iverything, an' all of the best"

"No whisky, Henry?"

"Ah, to be sure—a whole bottle o' John Jemison—a whole bottle. Ah, faith, I envied them that so I did." Henry shook his head, smacked his lips; a wistful look gleamed in his eyes. He sighed; continued. "Well, all bein' ready they drew up an' fell to on the bacon an' eggs, an' the tay, an' the white bread"

"And the whisky, Henry?"

"Ah, to be sure. Is it leave that? They set to, I'm tellin' ye, like a pair o' troopers; an' them laughin' all the time, an' singin' an odd time, an' turnin' now an' then to fling a word at meself"

"And you endured that, Henry?"

"Ah, to be sure." Slowly Henry made answer, as

though he were speaking to the hedge, speaking of what hardly concerned him. "To be sure. What could I do? 'Twas drink—'twas drink. An' weren't there the childer, anyway, to be considered."

"Yes—yes. And they gave you none of the feast, Henry?"

"Not a morsel."

"Nor the children?"

"Not a taste—aw, not a taste. An' sure I thought that hard, for the wee cratures needed it. Ay, they did Well, as I was tellin' ye, they ate an' drank an' sampled the whisky, an' had their divarsion; an' after a while up Ned gets, an' makes for the fire, an' falls; an' herself tries to help him up, an' falls; an' they begin to squabble, an' the childer begins the cryin', an' Jinny catches howld o' me; an' there's a powerful whillaloo—chairs an' stools flyin', cans an' pots tumblin', the whole place in a ruction. Aw, 'twas a bad scene, so it was; 'twas powerful bad. I niver seen a worse—niver in me born days"

"They fought, Henry?"

"Ay, like divils 'Twas the drink."

"And you could do nothing?"

"What could I do? What could I do but save the childer from murder 'Twas the drink."

"And then they made friends, Henry?"

"Ay. They did. They made it up an' got quiet again; an' after a while they went asleep, Ned lyin' on the table, an' herself wi' her head on a chair. I was glad o' that—sure I was—for the childer were hungry, the cratures, an' tired, an' dead wi' the sleep. So Jinny

an' meself gives them a bite, an' takes them up to the room, an' puts them to bed, an' stops wi' them till they're asleep I was glad o' that—yes, I was."

Henry stopped; drew his hand across his mouth; blinked slowly and gazed towards the Clackan hills. He looked starved and haggard in the broad light of evening. He turned to speak; hesitated; looked away. Patiently the Master waited, standing there with a smile playing on his lips and an incredulous look in his eyes. But Henry kept silent. Then said the Master:

"Well, Henry?" And again. "Well, Henry?"

"Aw, that's all—that's about all."

"No, Henry; there's more yet. Come. Tell me."

"Ah, it's nothin' 'Twas me own fault 'Twas the drink." Henry seemed questing for excuses.

"Ay, 'twas the drink," he repeated, almost with satisfaction; " 'twas the drink." Again he paused.

"Go on, Henry. Finish."

"Ay, I'm goin' Well, we got the childer to bed an' went back to the kitchen——"

"Jinny and you?"

"Ay, the two of us. She wouldn't leave me. We went back, I'm tellin' ye, an' sat down again be the fire. We had a bit to ate. Then I lit me pipe; an' Jinny got out her needle an' set herself to mendin' the childer's duds an' there we sat an' sat just waitin' for somethin' to happen"

Just waiting for something to happen. The phrase was so quaint, so pathetic nearly, that the Master had to turn away and laugh. It was a choice between laughing and crying. But Henry only paused a minute;

coughed and went on, hurrying now as if to have done.

"'Twas like this," he said. "After an hour or two I got a bit sleepy an' began noddin' on me stool; an' Jinny dozed a bit too; an' like that we were sittin' when all of a suddint Black Ned twists on the table in his sleep an' comes down slap on the flure. 'Twas like the end of the world the noise he made. I jumped that high—an' Jinny too—but it niver wakened herself, aw not a wake. Well, sir, Ned lay there for a while without movin'; an' just as we were wonderin' if he was killed, over he turns, scrambles to his knees, rises, rubs his eyes, looks round him, pulls out his pipe, lights it, an' without word or sign makes for the dure an' home An' the heart rose in me at that—it did. For sure Ned's a terror in the drink—an' somehow I niver cared for him. Naw, I didn't"

Somehow I never cared for him. The Master turned and looked Henry hard in the eyes. Was the man knave or fool? Was he crazed, as some said, by sickness and trouble? Did he know? Or was he feigning ignorance?

"Go on," said the Master.

"Well, after that," continued Henry, "we barred the dure, an' raked the fire, an' Jinny went to bed. . . . an' I goes over an' lifts herself's head off the chair an' shakes her awake, an' tells her to rise an' come to her bed. An' she rises an' looks at me, an' looks about her, an' goes up to the room, an' comes back, an' says she: 'Where's Ned?' 'He's gone home,' says I. 'Home,' says she; 'gone home? An' what took him home?'

'He went himself,' answers I; 'he fell off the table, an' got up, an' went home of his own free will.' 'It's a lie,' shouts she, 'it's a lie'; and wi' that flies into the ojujest tantrum ye iver seen. Ah, 'twas terrible bad. Niver before did I see her in the like. Ye could hear her a mile. An' there was the childer all awake an' roarin', an' Jinny shiverin' be the dresser—an' herself ravin', an' cursin', an' accusin' me o' sendin' Black Ned home Ah, sirs, but drink's the curse. She went fair mad An' at last she fell on meself, she came at me like a tiger an' hit me, an' tore me, an'—an'" Henry paused; shook his head. "'Twas a sore case," he said; "'twas a sore case."

What could the Master think? Seldom had he been in such perplexity. He could not fathom this puzzle of a man, could not decide whether he were deep or shallow, knave or fool. Did he know? Was he shielding her, hiding her sins beneath her faults, cloaking her enormities with his own weakness? Did he know? Was he telling truth? Was he guarding his tongue? Was he saying all he knew, or only all he chose to know, or merely all he was able to know?

"Well," said the Master. "Well, and what then, Henry?"

"Aw, she got tired at last," came back; "got tired at last—an' then she up, an' puts on her bonnet, an' goes out, an' slams the dure, an' leaves us there."

"Yes?" The Master was watching Henry between half closed eyelids. "Yes?" he said again.

"That's—that's all."

"All! All!" The Master shouted the word.
"But where did she go to?"

"I dunno." Very deliberately Henry answered, his eyes steady on the distant hills.

"You don't know! . . . And you haven't heard from her? Haven't tried to find her?"

"Naw. Sure she'll come back herself; she'll be sorry an' come back."

What could the Master think, or say, or do? He laid a hand on the man's arm.

"Henry," he said; "answer me truthfully. Do you know where she's gone to?"

Henry considered.

"Naw," he answered, "I wouldn't be sure. Mebbe it's to the brother's she's gone; mebbe it's to the cousin's beyond in Gorteen. But what matter, anyhow. Sure she'll come back—she'll come back."

What could the Master think? Was the man speaking truth? Was he saying all he knew, or only all he chose to know? Was he lying to save her, to save the children, to . . .? Ah, what matter, what matter! Nothing mattered in sight of the look of truth and innocence that lived on that haggard face.

"You think she will, Henry?" said the Master, his voice softening strangely. "You think so?"

"Think?" Henry's face flashed round. "To be sure I do. Arrah, why not? What'd keep her away?" His voice swelled harshly; he stood flushed—roused at last. "Sure 'twas only the drink an' a fit of temper. To be sure she'll come back, an' the childer here waitin' for her—an' the house waitin'—"

an' Jinny—an' . . .” His voice softened; hesitated; drawled out.

“Yourself, Henry?”

“Ay. Aw, ay. What's left o' meself.”

Henry turned; walked out among the rushes and stood looking across the lake. Over there in Gorteen dwelt his wife's cousin, there too her brother; across there in Lackan, above on the hillside, dwelt the man—poacher, gaol-bird, blackguard—whose nickname was Black Ned. But it was always towards Gorteen that Henry looked—always and unflinchingly. “Ay,” he said, and shaded his eyes, and looked steadily across the lake towards Gorteen; “what's left o' meself. Aw, to be sure she'll come back to us—to be sure . . .”

The Master dared not speak. He turned away and set out for home. And as he went, somehow life seemed bright with hope, the spring near and certain: and always, as he walked, had he clear vision of that battered figure standing there among the rushes, shading his eyes and watching for her who was sure to come.





SPOTTY

...



I

SLOWLY the Master trudged over the fields, hands clasped behind him, shoulders drooping a little, eyes peering keenly across the slopes, his waistcoat flapping open, shirt sleeves rolled high, hat cocked upon his crown; went on down from Emo across the rushy flats, counted the sheep upon the Long hill, the horses standing by Hick's wall, the cattle lying upon the river slope, then caught thumbs in armholes, went up the Crockan slope, and coming to its crest there sprawled upon the grass and looked out upon the land.

A Sabbath morning in July it was; and broad and pure as the golden dowry of sunshine lay everywhere the solemn peace of the Lord. Hardly a sound was there—hardly one. The cattle were resting, the sheep nibbling; the dogs asleep by silent thresholds; even the birds had fallen silent, and the wind that came steadily along the river valley only languished among the leaves. Abroad too upon the hills nothing stirred between the hedges, not a swallow across the brown-tipped rushes, not a figure before the whitewashed cottages or along the dusty road; the land seemed gone asleep in the heat beneath the radiant sky. Yet life was there in plenty, life slumbering in its Sabbath garb of summer; and nearer, right and left of the Master, Thrasna river came and went along its valley, a very

thing of life, flashing and dancing between the hills, along and away. The wind ruffled its face, the sun smote it and glowed within it like fire; here the current went swirling, there a fish flashed out and fell; on the island below Thady's cottage a goat stood browsing, further down Wee James sat fishing drowsily in a coat: then round past the big meadow it swept and was lost among the hills. But it lived—it lived that Sabbath morning!

For long enough the Master sprawled upon the Crockan-head, just leaning upon an elbow and looking here and there. He felt contented, glad to be alive, thankful to God for His mercies; it was well to be there in the sun, to look up at the sky and out across the pleasant fields—his own fields, his very own. He was at peace with the world that morning, reconciled to life and its drudgery, satisfied for once to be himself and none other in the world. His own land, cattle, sheep—lord of all that wide prospect—a king surveying his dominions: could mortal wish for more? He could smell the earth and the grass as he lay; could pick out one crop from another as they spread beyond in the valley; could tell his sheep by name, knew the face of every beast upon the slope better than he knew the face of a friend. Lovingly, thoughtfully his eyes roved from back to back across the herd, valuing, criticising, calculating, his brow puckered, lips pushed out, his head wagging softly in rhythm with thought. They were doing well, he spoke to himself, growing fast into solid money; within three months they would be worth And then, right across the every day flow of calculation, like

a flash from the deep peace of that Sabbath morning, shot swift memory of the words, *For every beast of the forest is mine and the cattle upon a thousand hills*; and the Master turned away his eyes and chid himself in his heart.

In a while he rose, slowly went down the Crockan, out upon the hill and along the slope; presently stopped short among the rushes and stood looking fixedly at a spotted heifer which lay by herself at skirts of the herd. A fine full-grown beast she was with curled horns, and a coat of silken fineness; but now her head had fallen and her jaw was quiet; and seeing that, the Master stood among the rushes in a world gone gloomy as death, a world that held for him nor sun nor Sabbath. Another? And Spotty now!

He strode towards her; and at sound of his foot Spotty looked round, turned upon her knees and rose. Behind was a sudden commotion among the herd, a sound of rising, of stretching, of blowing and licking; but never a sound from Spotty; no arching of the back or slow straining of the muscles, no twist of the head and soft low of content in sight of the Master. Listless she stood, ears drooping, head lowered, her great soft eyes looking piteously forth, big with a dumb message of suffering. *Something is wrong*, they seemed so say, *something strange has come to me*; and so far Spotty spoke clearly and the Master read distinctly—so far and no farther. *What is it?* questioned the Master, and groped with fingers and eyes and brain; *what is it Spotty, lass?* And the answer was tragic silence; unutterable knowledge in the eye of the beast,

maddening ignorance in that of the human. *If you only knew; if I could only tell you*, said Spotty's eyes; *If I only knew, if you could only tell me*, said the Master within himself; then sighed heavily, clasped hands behind him and slowly went driving Spotty up towards Emo.

Another? The Master tightened his lips. What is it? said he. What ails her; what ails her? And for answer Spotty trudged slowly on, resignedly and listlessly, as might one who went uncaring to meet death; never turning her head, or quickening a step, or lifting an ear at sound of the farewell lowing that came softly up from the river, never turning an eye even upon the dainties of pasture that lay scattered along her path.

Did she know? Did she understand?

II

THE two crossed the hill, went along the flat, up to Emo, and coming to the yard turned through the doorway of an empty loose-box. It was cool in there and somewhat dim, the roof high, a window looking towards the haggard, the floor deep in clean oaten straw that rustled crisply beneath the foot and filled the place with wholesomeness. And knee deep in the straw stood Spotty, with the Master watching her as he leant against the wall.

For once in a way the Master was perplexed. That Spotty was sick he knew without doubt; but the nature of her sickness he could not determine. Often enough—

too often, God knows—he had stood there watching and judging, but never so blindly as to-day. Always before there had been something to clutch at, some major symptom that gave a clue; now there was nothing, nothing but plain signs of some desperate malady, of some new terror in the land. What was it? As if there had not been enough before; as if the old horrors were not far too much! What was it? cried the Master to himself again; then, groaning aloud, trod across the straw and tried for the divination of his hands.

“Poor Spotty,” he said; “poor old girl”; so, scratching and rubbing, pulling and probing, stooping to look at her muzzle, counting the beats in the great vein of her neck, seeking for this sign or that, watching this symptom or the other, patiently the Master groped for light. And quite in vain. The case was beyond him. This thing he knew, and that had heard of; but this—and this—and this? No. The case was beyond him. Of one thing only was he certain, that there stood Spotty in the straw, stricken desperately of some new thing. Ah, those eyes, the great patience and pathos of them, the dumb tragic mystery! *If I only knew*, cried the Master; *if I only knew*: so, groaning and crying within him, went out and closed the door.

Beard on breast and his forehead wrinkled, he crossed the yard—crossed it as might one struck blind in the sunlight—went through the kitchen, up into the parlour, took his *Cattle Doctor* from a shelf, sank into an elbow-chair and fell to rummaging the book. A tattered volume it was, backless, dog-eared, soiled with thumbs and ugly medicine stains; one of the two or three books

that the Master had ever read, one that he knew by heart and now sat pondering, seeking there the inspiration of counsel that a man hungers for in the face of a friend. There was nothing of use in it, nothing he did not know; still—still—somewhere might lurk a golden sentence, an unthumbed page, a word or two of magic import, something—something

Bah! It was folly, waste of time; every minute lost now was infinitely precious. He flung down the book, rose briskly and went to the kitchen, took down the physic-bottle (an ordinary quart bottle it was, with a long neck) and physic-tins from a shelf, mixed and diluted a dose, tied on a coarse apron, and ordering the servant to follow him, went out with the bottle in his hand.

Half-way across the yard he raised his head and saw Wee James standing by the loose-box door. "Ha, James—it's you?" he said, with a nod; then, having sent back the servant, walked on; stopped; looked up. "This is a bad business, James," said he, with his hand on the latch.

"Is it Spotty, sir?"

"Ay. It's Spotty. When did you see her last?"

"I went round them this mornin'. There was nothin' noticeable then. Sure it gave me a turn to see ye drivin' her up the hill." James' voice came plaintive, his face was solemn; like one come to seek news of a sick relative he looked and spoke. "But sure," he broke off, "sure mebbe it's nothin' at all?"

"It's something bad, James—very bad."

"Ah, nonsense. Arrah, whisht. Is it Spotty! An' what has come to her?"

The Master slipped the latch. "Come and see." And the two went in.

Just in the same place, knee deep in the straw, Spotty was standing, her head to the window, eyes fixed steadily on the walls. Not a move, not a sound, she made; but her breathing came quick and heavy. The Master crossed, leant against a hayrack and stood watching her; James, his head forward, cap thrust back, hands behind him, went up and down, round and round her, a straw in his mouth and his lips puckered. Mighty knowing looked James; his shoulders drooped as beneath the wisdom of ages; his eyes roved Spotty from hoof to horn with an intensity of vision that was almost piercing; he stooped, listened, peered, groped and felt and pulled: at last, stopped near the Master, pondered a minute, slowly turned. "Would it be *infermation*?" said he, with a cock of his head.

The Master's eyes twinkled. "No, James," he answered; "it wouldn't."

Once more James turned to his task of cogitation; once more paced round and round, stepping high and somewhat absurdly (just as a turkey steps across stubble) over the straw; then stopped and turned again. "It wouldn't be a kind of a *plurisy*, now?" he asked, with a cunning leer of the eye.

The Master shook his head. "No, James. It's hardly that."

James caught chin between thumb and forefinger, wrinkled his brow, looked hard at the straw. "Sure it wouldn't be a *murren*, or—or——?"

"No, James."

“Nor a chill she’d be catchin’, or a surfeit, or—or somethin’?”

“It’s something.” The Master moved from the wall. “It’s surely something.”

“An’ bad?” James dropped his questions gently, almost sighingly, between thumb and forefinger. “An’ bad?” he murmured.

“She’s very bad.” The Master shook the physic-bottle, took off his hat and hung it on a harness peg. “An’ she’ll be worse,” he said; “much worse.”

“An’ ye wouldn’t be guessin’, now, yourself, what’s come to her—or how it came—or what you’ll be doin’—?” Something crossed between James and the light. He ceased droning, looked up; then, without a word, stepped round Spotty and took her by the horns. “Have ye’ light?” asked he, pulling at the horns. “Have ye, or will I bring her head round to the dure?”

“Let her be,” said the Master; and within a minute Spotty’s head was back, the bottle-neck across her tongue and the physic gurgling down—down to the last bitter drop.

She took the infliction well, stoically and passively: gave just a terrified plunge; then stood snorting, her legs rigid and spread, her eyes big and startled; then let drop her head, twitched her dripping muzzle, rolled her tongue, blinked slowly, turned towards the Master and *mooed* (yes; easily you might think so) her thanks. *Moo*, she said just once; then drew in her legs, fixed her eyes on the walls, and so patiently stood waiting.

Wee James stepped round (slowly and absurdly like a jester at a funeral) through the straw, caught thumbs

in the armholes of his waistcoat and stood as if peering between the red and white spots into the mystery of Spotty's interior. "D'ye think it'll do anythin'?" he asked in a minute, slowly and solemnly, with a half turn of the head.

"It might," said the Master. He wiped his hands in the apron, took his hat from the rack, moved for the door. "It might," he said, with a wag of his beard. "Anyway, we'll know more in a couple of hours. Keep an eye on the rest," he said; then, having called Mary for apron and bottle, left James, crossed the yard and stood watching the Mother and the boys come down the avenue in the taxcart on their way from Church. All gay and merry they came; but at sight of the Master's face their eyes sobered.

"What is it?" called Hal, as the car drew up. "What's wrong now." The Master stood silent, looking critically, you might think, at the grey mare's legs. "What is it, Father?" shouted Hal. "Ah, tell us, can't ye?"

The Master looked up, straight and only for a moment—ah, but such a moment—into the Mother's eyes; then turned to Hal. "Another," said he.

"Another?" It came in a chorus, from all but the Mother. "An' what?"

"Spotty." The Master stepped to the grey mare's side and stood patting her neck.

"Spotty? . . . Spotty? . . . Spotty!"

A wave of subdued emotion, of inarticulate dismay, gathered and hung toppling over the car. The Mother sat quite still, looking out across the garden with mourn-

ful eyes; the boys, Hal with reins and whip, Ted and Jem twisting round across the seat-back, sat rigid in their places, their young faces strangely shadowed beneath that toppling crest, their eyes full of pity—the Mother's reflected pity—for the Master. Another? And Spotty now? And *he* had to bear it all!

So for maybe a minute it was; then, the mare moved, the wave broke, down jumped the boys and went hurrying for the loose-box: there to probe and chatter round that unfortunate of a Spotty.

The Master let them chatter. It was youth's way. They knew nothing, but could do no harm. He helped the Mother down, took mare and car to the stables; then, by way of passing the half-hour which lay before dinner-time, strolled through the haggard, put shoulder to a post of the hayshed and there stood pondering, with his eyes on the patch of ground that lay at his feet—the mounded resting-place of all the others.

All? How many now? And how many to-morrow? . . . Why was fate so cruel? Ah, why was the hand of God so heavy upon him? It was hard to bear; it was hard to bear!

III

In those parts bad news goes over the hedges like an east wind; and by two o'clock all the world knew that another was *took* in Emo, took with some kind of a mortal curious complaint, that, as Wee James put it, would puzzle the head off ye. So all that golden afternoon you

might have thought an earl lay sick in the big house, so many were the callers, and so anxious were their enquiries, and so solemn their mien. Down the lane they came, in couples, in singles, hands under Sabbath coat-tails, hats slouched over downcast eyes; and into the loose-box they went, and circled through the straw, and groped, and pondered, and looked mighty wise, and gave their opinions, their advice, their sympathy; went off shaking their heads at last and leaving the crature to the care of God. "Sure it's powerful strange," they would say, tramping out into the sunshine, "what'd be ailin' her. Ay, it is, it is. An' sure may God spare her to ye, sur, for it's trouble enough you'd be havin' already." And the Master would nod his thanks, and turn again to that patient figure standing in the straw.

About four o'clock a group of four—the Master, Hal, Wee James, and Henry from Kilfad—were discussing questions of physic and treatment near the door, when across the yard came Annie the wife of James, a child at her tail and a baby on her arm. "Can I see her?" she said; and the Master nodding assent, Annie went in to Spotty, her heart big with a message of pity and sympathy. "Ah, poor Spotty," she murmured, and slowly went over the straw with outstretched hand; "ah, poor ould woman, poor ould Spotty. *Trish, trish, now—trish, trish.*" Coming quite close, she fell to scratching the heifer's back, and crooning plaintively: all at once stopped, stood listening a minute, then turned quickly for the door. "Ah," she cried, "the crature—the crature! Listen—my God, listen to it!"

The group broke, wheeled, came towards the door.

"What is it?" went the voices. "What is it, Annie?"

"Her heart," cried Annie; "her heart. Listen—listen!" She paused in the doorway, her head turned, hand raised, eyes kindled and staring. "Hush," she said. The men, craning eagerly across the threshold, fell silent. "Hush. D'ye hear it? My God, d'ye hear it? Whisht . . . Whisht . . ."

Annie's whisper died out. The men held their breath. Dead silence fell. Then, quite distinctly across the straw, very quick and marked, like the beat of a piston, came the muffled thud of Spotty's heart. "D'ye hear it?" cried Annie. "Aw, Lord, Lord!" And with a shivering sob she fled across the yard.

It was indeed a terrifying, almost an uncanny, sound that came with such horrible distinctness out of the silence and the gloom, telling of such agony of suffering, such supremacy of endurance; and hearing it, the men drew sharp breaths between their teeth and looked in each other's eyes, and the Master, stricken with horror of the thing and the thought of his own helplessness, lost grip of himself and burst into sudden frenzy of panic.

"I'll lose her; I'll lose her. . . . She's dyin'; she's dyin'. . . . My God, what is it? What can I do—what can I do?" He turned to the door, imperious and wrathful. "Here, come out the lot of you—come out an' leave her to myself. D'ye want to stifle her? Out o' my way; out o' my way!"

The men hurried forth; the Master strode in, stayed a minute and came back. His face flared, his eyes

blazed; himself and his voice seemed to fill the place with commotion. "What are ye all standing there for?" he shouted. "Can't ye be doing something? Out o' my way; out o' my way!"

He hurried towards the house, carrying noise with him and bustle: stopped short: hurried on: stopped once more and turned. "Here, Hal"—his voice came tense and hard—"take the mare and go for Reilly the vet. Tell him what you can. Tell him to bring physic. And don't delay."

Hal ran; the Master's voice rang into the house, resonant as a trumpet-call. "Here, Ted—Ted—Ted. Come; stir yourself, sir! Saddle the Paddy horse and ride your best to Gorteen for Micky the cow-doctor. Tell him I want him. Tell him to come at once. Ride—ride!"

Ted ran for the stables. From the back-yard came a sound of stamping hooves, of shouting and jingling. Cocks were crowing, pigs squealing. In the kitchen Annie's baby was crying. Back near the gateway Wee James and Henry the herd stood mum as posts. Like a musket shot rang out the Master's voice: "Go and help them, ye fools!" and the two turned in a panic.

"Now then, quick there with those horses. D'you want to be all night? Quick—quick!" Out came Ted with the Paddy horse; behind came Hal with the mare and car. "Off you go, Ted. Come; jump up, Hal, jump up!" Ted sprang into the saddle; Hal clambered into the car: a whirl, a shout, a clatter: and once more peace and the sunshine held sway in the land.

For a while the Master stood looking towards the

road; then, a foot sounding behind him, turned and saw the Mother crossing the yard. Their eyes met; together they went over the stones, going slowly and silently, went in to Spotty, and side by side took their places before her close to the hayrack. She had not moved. Stolidly, patiently, she stood in the straw, head down and her eyes fixed on the walls. You might have thought her asleep; you might have thought her not changed for the worse; only, she moaned softly at intervals, and shook to and fro, and clearly, horribly, her heart-pulse thumped in time with the vibration.

The Master groaned and leant against the wall; the Mother stood with folded hands, looking and listening. She knew what pain was. She had borne it often. She was bearing it now—only like Spotty she kept pain silent.

“She’ll die,” said the Master; “she’ll die surely. I never saw a beast like that before. Look at her—listen to it! It’s terrible. Why, her heart must be nearly bursting. It’s—it’s terrible!”

The Mother crossed, laid a hand on Spotty’s neck and softly began rubbing and patting. “Poor woman,” she murmured—almost tearfully, you might say, and just as though the dumb beast were human; “poor Spotty. And what ails you? What ails you, Spotty, at all?”

“I might have known,” said the Master; “I might have known that something was going to happen. Why should I waken up in the night and go to the window as I did; and why should I see all the cattle lying beyond the gate and only one of them with its head up?”

That must have been Spotty—it must have been. She was lying by herself, and she was looking towards the river—looking you might think for the sun to rise. And something told me to go out—but it was only twilight—and they were all there—and I didn't. I didn't. And now—!”

The Mother came back to the wall, turned and folded her hands again. Her lips were firm; but you might have thought her eyes held tears. “What is it?” she said, in a while.

“God knows.”

“Ay. God knows And it's God will.”

The Master dared not answer. God's will seemed inscrutable at times. He kept back speech, but his eyes gleamed rebelliously. Why should God smite the beasts of the field; the beasts of his fields? And why should he smite the best of the flock, and smite her so cruelly? Listen Listen!

“Can you do nothing?” said the Mother.

“I've done all I can. I've sent for help. I don't know what to do.”

“And—and—” The Mother turned quickly. “Do you think we'll lose her?”

The Master paused, groping within himself. “God knows,” answered he at last. “God knows.”

What better might he answer, even concerning a beast of the field?

IV

REILLY the vet stepped down from the car, nodded to the Master and turned to Hal for his carpet-bag. He was a tall dark man, lean and wiry, sharp featured and sallow, his nose long and drooping, his eyes black and cunning, lips very thin, face very hard. He wore a brown suit of tweeds, a green necktie and a slouched hat. Across his waistcoat gleamed a plated chain; on a dirty finger was a sham ring; from a pocket peeped the shank of a clay pipe. Some said he was a qualified surgeon, many called him no less than a quack. This was his first call to Emo, and his reputation there was yet to make.

He took his carpet-bag (the professional kit it was) from Hal and came to the Master. "Good evenin' to yourself?" he said, putting out his hand. "Well, here I am. Where's the baste? Aw, bedad, but it's the fine evenin', now," he continued, as they crossed the yard, his thin, bloodless voice coming shrill and sharp, "an' it's the fine place you'll have here, God prosper it. Ay So here we are, then—an' this is her ladyship, is it? Ay, now. Ay, now."

Leaving his bag in a corner by the door, Mr. Reilly put hands under coat-tails, cocked his head towards Spotty and for a minute stood looking at her; then, crossed the straw, slapped her smartly on the back and clicked his tongue. "Gar up," said he, with a snap. "Gar up wi' ye." Spotty jerked her head, arched her back, shrank from the blow and moved a step forward. "Gar up,"

said Reilly again; then, following Spotty up with a hand sliding along her back, began his examination.

His hand was heavy, his touch clumsy, his methods rough and coarse, his voice and manner heartless. Clearly, he saw in Spotty only a brute beast, so much potential human food, something that if kicking would cure he would as lief kick as physic. For herself he had no thought of pity, with her sufferings only a professional sympathy. If he wanted her to move he kicked her leg, to turn he slapped her side; he twisted her tail, tugged at her teats, sent her moaning up and down, shrinking when he touched her, blinking with a piteous throw of the head when he passed her eyes. And Spotty endured it; and the Master, standing with folded arms against the wall, endured it also.

In a while the man turned, hooked thumbs in arm-holes, twisted eyes upon the Master and spoke. "An' how have ye been treatin' her?" he asked, contempt and insolence quick in his voice.

Curtly the Master made answer.

"Ay. I know." With a sneer the man turned, pulled off his coat and hung it on a peg. "Well, it's God's doin' ye haven't killed her . . . You've got a physic-bottle I suppose? Ay. Well, I'd be the better of it. An' a can o' water'd do no harm. An' one o' them sons o' yours might try his hand at holdin' her head . . ."

"Then you think you know what's the matter?" said the Master, stopping on his way to the door.

"I niver think—when I'm sure. Away now like a man for that water."

Water was brought, and the bottle; in a corner, over his carpet-bag, Mr. Reilly mixed a dose; Hal came to hold Spotty's horns, and Ted to stand by her tail: and all was noise and confusion.

"Gar up," shouted the man. "Bring round her head, can't ye, to the light Stan' close, you there, an' keep her from backin'. Here, yourself, hold that bottle." He flung his hat upon the straw, rolled up his sleeves, came edging nearer with the bottle in his hand. "Gar up *Pwff* there—*pwff* now—gar up Round wi' her head—up wi' it Ah, dang ye, hold her firm! Now—now What! You'll not open your jaw, won't ye! Ye won't, won't ye! You'll try to bate me, will ye! Whisht. Ho, I've got ye, me girl; I've got ye! There's somethin' 'll cool the heart in ye Let her go, boys. Gar up there An' now leave her to git a grip o' that, an' we'll be steppin' across for a sup o' tay."

Crossing the yard, Mr. Reilly flung off his professional airs, took to himself a beaming manner and went into the parlour swaggering the gentleman. He put his hat under his chair, spread a red pocket handkerchief on a knee, sat down at a genteel distance from the table and began to talk. He spoke of many things—not of Spotty, or of things so trifling as she, but of fairs, of physics, of the diseases of cattle, of sundry interesting operations that he himself had witnessed and performed—and spoke glibly, not with any vulgar show of vain boasting, yet with an agreeable and modest tribute of personal allusion. You could not call him dogmatic, but

he had a manly confidence in himself and his opinions. He did not shout, but his laughter made jingle the china. When tea came to him he said, "Thank ye kindly, ma'am," spilled it into his saucer and gulped it. Scorning a plate he leant an elbow upon it and ate bread and butter from his hand. "This'll be prime butter o' yours, ma'am," he said, and to show his appreciation thereof spread it upon cake. Asked to have a fifth cup he raised protesting hands "Not another drop, ma'am, if ye please—for it's full I'll be. But, savin' your presence, I'll take a draw." And tilting back his chair against the wall, Mr. Reilly began to smoke. But the Mother saved her presence—for the dumb beast of a Spotty.

For a full hour he sat handing his credentials from chair to chair; then rose, pulled down his waistcoat and went out to view the sky. "Ah, but it's the lovely evenin'," said he upon the door-step. "Now, but the mountain looks beautiful . . . Come away round wi' ye till we have a look at her ladyship," he said at last. "Troth, an' it's meself'd laugh to see her chewin' her cud."

But, for once in a way, Mr. Reilly had to restrain his laughter; for her ladyship stood in the straw unmistakably worse. She looked weaker; her head was lower; her eyes seemed covered with a sickly film; her breath came quicker; every now and again she moaned, gave a shrinking shiver, looked slowly round at her heaving sides—looked, you might think, in search of the pain. And always her heart beat out its pitiful story.

Mr. Reilly pursed his lips, set his head, looked his

knowingest; turned at last in a flurry and flung off his coat.

"Bring out a chair," he shouted, "bring out a basin. Tell them to come to me. It's bleedin' she wants." He took from his carpet-bag a brass handled fleam, opened a blade and tried its edge with his thumb. "Hurry, hurry," he shouted, dancing towards the Master. "Man alive, stir yourself . . . Is it have me lose the baete ye would? Bring a basin quick, I tellye . . . Look at her. Don't let her down—for God's sake, don't let her down," shouted the man and, even as Spotty doubled her knees and sank moaning in the straw, rushed over and began pulling at her tail. "She mustn't lie," he shouted; "she mustn't lie. Gar up." He kicked brutally at her buttocks. "Gar up—gar up, ye devil!"

Then the Master crossed, took him by the shoulders and sent him spinning against the wall. "Get back, you brute!" The Master was hoarse with anger, his eyes flashed red murder. "Get out o' my sight," he shouted, "you ignorant brute! You a cattle doctor—you a Christian! Get out, I say; get out o' my sight. Here, take your trumpery." Out went the carpet-bag, the coat, the fleam, into the yard; out came the Master raging and flaring. "You'd murder my beast—you'd kick her to death—you'd torture the life out of her! I'm sick of the sight of you. Get out; get out!"

As a beggar flies before a bulldog, so went Reilly the vet before the Master; then, coming to the road, mounted the ditch and over the hedge poured upon Emo a deluge of profanity. But only Tim the dog gave heed or answer.

V

It had fallen dusk when Micky came, jogging soberly into the yard on an old white pony, his long coat of frieze hanging down to the stirrups, a beaver hat on his crown, a short pipe in his mouth. "I'm late," said he, and clambered stiffly down; "I'm late—but I done me best. Am I too late?" he asked, taking the Master's hand. "No. Well, thank God for that! Come away, till I see her; come away."

He was an old man, very tall and bony, somewhat stooped and lame of a leg. His face was big and square and grizzled and wrinkled; his lips were clean cut and firm, his brow broad over piercing grey eyes—the eyes of the diviner. He looked into you, holding your hand and speaking not a word; read you to the heart and hobbled way. Everyone respected him, rogues feared him; from all parts men came seeking his counsel, bringing to him their complaints both of mind and body, and their horses to be judged, and their cattle to be cured. He was an ignorant man who knew everything, a sapient who had never learnt. With cattle he was no less than a wizard, divining them in some wondrous fashion, curing them by rule of thumb in a way almost miraculous. But he never revealed either himself or his methods; he was entirely without pretension; and, poverty notwithstanding, he never took a fee. Micky the Doctor, was his name in those parts—a name that deserves high place in the lists of renown.

He hobbled across the yard, gave good evening to Hal

and Wee James and the neighbours who stood about the door, went in and sat down on a stool which had been set for him by the wall underneath the harness-rack. Before him lay Spotty, heaving and moaning; near by stood the Master with folded arms; Hal and Wee James were in the doorway, each with a neighbour's face above his shoulder; a lantern hanging on the wall above Micky's head showed Spotty lying in a ring of light that faded back and back into the mocking glooms and shadows of dusk.

Micky rested elbows on knees, clasped hands and bent forward with his eyes fixed on Spotty; sat hunched upon the stool, his back bowed, face stern and intent, every fibre of him tense as bowstrings. Crouching there in the shadow beneath the lantern he looked somewhat grotesque, almost uncanny—an Ancient of time, you might think, bent forward in the gloom and gazing breathlessly into that ring where life wrestled desperately with death. Like a thing of stone he sat, motionless and grim, with the eyes of all hard upon him; at last, ten minutes maybe having gone silently, pursed his lips, looked a moment at his hands, then turned to the Master.

“How long has she been bad?”

The Master said.

“What ha' ye done for her?”

The Master told.

“D'ye know what Reilly gave her?”

“No, Micky.”

“Is this the first case o' the kind?”

“It is, Micky.”

"I know." He left the stool, crossed and knelt by Spotty, laid his hand upon her side, felt her pulse, stroked her muzzle, sat back a while on his heels; then, gravely shaking his head, rose slowly from the straw. "Poor ould girl," said Micky, and at the words Hal looked at Wee James in the doorway and the Master pursed his lips; "poor ould girl. You're gettin' it sore, me woman—you're gettin' it sore. She's bad," he said to the Master; "she's bad."

"Very bad, Micky?"

"The worst."

"She'll die?"

"She will." Micky turned for the door, stopped near it and looked back. "Ye can do little but ease her." He named a soothing draught, and gave a direction or two. "Mortal man couldn't save her. She's bad, the crature; och, she's very bad." He turned again. "Ay, childer," he said, passing the doorway, "it's come to her afore her time."

Outside stood the Mother, waiting beneath the stars.

"She's in God's hands, ma'am," said Micky and hobbled on.

The Master came out, went for the pony, helped the old man to mount; walked by him along the lane out to the road. "So you came too late, Micky, after all?" he said.

"I dunno—I'm fearin'—I wouldn't say." Micky shook his head. "Early or late there's somethin' yonder—ah, it's a sore case."

The Master looked up. "Have you fathomed it, Micky?" he asked.

“It’s a sore case,” came back, after a pause, “an’ it’s a kind o’ curious Good-night. An’ God be good to ye.”

VI

THE neighbours went; one by one the boys fell sleepy and tramped up to bed; the Mother closed her book, rose, went through the kitchen and out across the yard. The night was warm and full of stars, calm and very peaceful; only a sound of moaning broke its quietness, only a dim glare of light falling out through a doorway marred its serenity. Only these.

Alone beneath the lantern sat the Master, looking into that ring of light, arms crossed upon his knees, his body bent forward. As the Mother entered he looked round. “Why,” he said, “I thought you were in bed. Don’t sit up. It’s no use.” He rose. “I don’t think it can be long now,” he said, looking at the ring. “It seems very quick.”

“Is she suffering much?”

“Terribly.”

“Poor thing!” The Mother’s voice came quivering. “Oh, poor thing!” She stood silent awhile. “Can you do nothing?”

“Nothing at all. I’ve done everything I can think of—everything.”

“And you’ll stay with her?”

“Yea.”

The Mother turned away. “Ah, Spotty, Spotty,”

she murmured. At the door she looked back, saying Good-bye you might think; then went on beneath the stars across the yard. And the Master and Spotty were left alone.

He sat down again beneath the lantern and bent forward, elbow on knee, cheek on hand, eyes steady on the moaning figure there in the ring of light. His face showed gloomy and stern in its setting of shadow; now and then he moved a limb, or hid his eyes, or turned to look through the doorway; he seemed possessed of much patience and great pity. But patience came easily to one who so often and so helplessly, night after night along the years, had seen the lantern shine on such tragedies of patience; and pity he could spare even to a trodden worm And now it was Spotty.

At intervals he rose, crossed and held a bucket to her nose, scratching her forehead the while and coaxing her to drink. More than once he helped her to move, handling her with much tenderness. Two or three journeys he made to and from the house, going for warm water, or physic, or oil for the lantern; came back at last, sometime near midnight, with a book, pulled his stool out of the shadow and carelessly began turning the leaves. Here and there he searched, backwards and forwards, searching always in that single book of his for some word of light on this darkest of mysteries. What is it? he asked of himself. What is it? His head dropped and he fell asleep.

Outside the world lay sleeping quietly. Nothing stirred upon it, no sound came from field or highway; the utter silence was awesome out there on the big

empty earth beneath the big hollow sky. Everything was dead in the world, dead or fast asleep—everything but the dumb creature that the stars heard moaning through the night. And she happily fell weaker as the hours went.

About one o'clock the book fell softly and woke the Master. He looked at the book, at Spotty, at the night; rested head on hand and sat staring at the straw. It was time, he thought, to give her give her

About two o'clock he woke again with a start, rose and carried the bucket to Spotty; went out and looked at the night, trudged back shivering a little, sat down with his back against the wall and set himself steadily to watch. She seemed easier, he thought; she looked looked

Again all was peace in the world. Hardly now did that sound of moaning creep out through the doorway. Silently the minutes passed. Slowly a greyness crept over the hedges, paling the stars. A light sprang in the east and waxed softly; the greyness whitened; the fields flung off the night; a wind came stirring the leaves and waking the birds to song and suddenly, like a herald of the dawn, a cock flapped its wings lustily and crew.

The sound woke the Master. He blinked at the flooding light; looked at Spotty; then started to his feet and crossed the straw. Her head was down, her moaning ceased; and, even as the Master stooped and the cock crew again, she shuddered, gave a long heaving sigh and went asleep.



THE BROTHERS



I

IT was in Emo valley, one June morning, that Jan Farmer told me this story. We were lying in the heather upon a turf-bank; Jan sprawling flat, as his manner was, hands beneath his head, cap over his eyes, the whole six feet of him breathing utter laziness. A briar pipe lay beside him (for Jan, you must know, had sighted manhood) and a book (think of that); he wore no coat and no collar and no waistcoat, his breast was naked to the sunshine and his arms were bare to the elbows; when I talked seriously he laughed, if I jested he jibed; sometimes he flung up his legs and shouted at the sky, sometimes roared out a stave, or broke into raving nonsense, or pelted me with clods, or turned over and playfully belaboured me upon the heather Yes; assuredly was Jan in merry mood that day. Like a king he rioted and took his pleasure, tasting of real happiness I am sure, living life at its best and to the full. No burden of thought or care troubled him, no ills of mind or body just flat in the heather he lay, glorying in the sunshine and in the gifts of his youth and strength, taking joyfully of the bounties of that perfect day.

In a while there came towards us along the valley a woman who carried a child upon her arm and a basket in her hand. She was dressed in peasant fashion—cotton bodice, coarse skirt, heavy boots, white sunbonnet—

and she came slowly through the sunshine, trudging wearily and soberly. Yet the day was beautiful, and the woman looked young, and she had a red ribbon about her throat, and I seemed to know her face: so I turned to Jan. "Who's that?" said I. Jan raised his head; looked; lay back. "Why, don't you know? That's Annie Trotter," said he; "herself that was once Annie Marvin, an' married Wee James." I whistled softly. "Oh," said I. "Indeed She's greatly changed." Jan laughed. "Ay," said he, "she is so. Times are altered with her since the days she played pranks wi' Harry Thompson. Ah, faith are they! She's tamed, my boy. There's not much sauce on her tongue now. Marryin' an' a flock of children have killed the tomboy in her. She—she Ah, but she was the devil," said Jan, a little bitterly; "but she was the devil." I looked at Jan. "Yes," I said, "she was a dashing blade—once. She tried her arts on more than Harry, though, didn't she?" Again Jan laughed, and writhed upon the heather. "Ay," said he; "she did Lord, the game it all was—the dance she led poor Harry—the fright she gave myself! Never will I forget that time Man, the spree it was But sure it was only her woman's way. She couldn't help herself. Women are born like that. They must always be dancin' after the men, an' settin' them by the heels, an' turnin' the world upside down. They're the divils—they're the divils," cried Jan; then paused awhile; then sat upright in the heather and went on with his story.

We, Dennis Hayes and oneself (the story is his, the words are mine), were on the broad road which from the shores of Lough Lamar runs right and straight through the outskirts of Cavan, then crosses the border and soon is wending for Leck town and the heart of Meath. Hitherto, our way had lain through an arid country, a place of bleak mountains, scrubby hills, and bare cottages scattered sparsely among barren fields: now, once in fat Meath, suddenly all was changed. From a desert we had passed, as it were, to a land of gardens. The hedges sprang thick and tall; the hills stood round and fruitful, the fields lay lush and soft; here was a fox-cover, there a cluster of giant poplars, far off stretched a fir plantation backed by the light blue of a mountain and the lighter azure of the horizon: everywhere, prosperity lay brooding and smiling—on the golden orchards, the snug farmhouses, the great wide-spreading pastures.

We were just in the midst of all that; when, suddenly, almost in sight of the white walls of Leck, over the hedgerow on our left rose the gaunt skeleton of a house. Like the wreck of some great amiral it lay, forlorn and pitiable, its rafters naked to the sky, its window-holds empty and moss-grown, its walls cracked and weather-stained; within and without a place of weeds and desolation, a home of loneliness and ghosts. Like a plague spot it showed on the comeliness of the countryside; and seeing it I turned to Dennis.

"What, in Heaven's name, does it mean?" said I.
"Is—is it haunted or what?"

Without a word, Dennis stepped across the road,

mounted the ditch and stood looking over the hedgerow. Quickly I followed; and there had sight of the whole forlornness of the place. Here was an orchard tangled, broken; there a haggard empty and disordered; between them lay a garden in riotous ruin, a wilderness of choked fruit trees, flaunting weeds, overgrown paths, tumbled beehives. The yard was a meadow; the out-houses a long misery of broken walls and battered roofs. Not a bird stirred in the empty eaves, not a hoof showed itself on hill or field: right and left, here and there, was only loneliness and desolation.

For a while I stood there looking and wondering; then, quite suddenly and discordantly, like the sound of a meadow crake breaking through the night, came the voice of Dennis.

"It gets worse an' worse," said he, with a slow wag of the head; "worse an' worse. Last time I came these parts 'twas only an eyesore: now it's like some deserted graveyard or other. Ay. It's miserable to cast eyes on it. It's like something you'd dream about. An', man, the pity it is! The fine place it was once, the fine prosperous place; the best house in all Meath, an' the best land from here to back again. Yes, sir. An' now look at it An' all through a woman," said Dennis and cut viciously at the hedge with his stick; "all through a woman."

"A woman?" said I, looking round. "A woman, you said, Dennis?"

"Ay," returned he. "What's it But don't ye know?" asked he, with a half turn of his head. "Ye don't? Then where, in glory's name, were ye? Abroad,

is it? Aw, yes, indeed. Abroad where they live in their ignorance, an' want to know nothin', an' never see a paper . . . Well, come away an' I'll tell ye," said he; then left the ditch, took again to the road, in a while clambered over an iron gate and led the way along a track which ran through the fields and down a slope that lay below the ruined house. "The best land in Ireland," moaned Dennis as he went, hands beneath his coat-tails, eyes roaming far and near; "an' it gone to the divil. Look at it! Think o' the flocks and herds, that ought to be sportin' through all them fields . . . An' not one there is: not one. An' not a soul is there to be seen. An' hardly a foot ever stirs the dew. An' why? ye ask. Well, just for this: That there's a curse on it; an' there's blood on it; an' there's a ghost in it . . . But wait," said Dennis, with a wave of his arm. "Leave that for a while."

At foot of the slope we came to a stream, just then somewhat shallow but steep and high in its banks, that ran pleasantly towards the road (being crossed there by a single-arched stone bridge) and came bickering merrily past the meadows and poplars and willow-clumps along the valley. Towards this from the house a path came down, reached a foot-plank that stretched from bank to bank, and went on, as it were, past a hazel thicket and up a slope on the further side. The plank was broad and stout, and worn somewhat in the middle; it we passed easily, Dennis crossing himself devoutly the while, and near it sat down in the grass with our feet dangling over the water.

All was very peaceful just there, in that golden after-

noon; just a voice at intervals from the road and the fields beyond it, a soft babble from the stream, the hum of gnats and the twitter of birds, over all the serenity of a summer sky.

Dennis lit his pipe; leant elbows on knees, crossed his arms and looked at the foot-plank.

"Ay," said he, "that's the place. Who'd think, lookin' at it now, that sunshiny an' innocent it looks, that ever such things could ha' happened? Ah, it's wonderful the ways o' the world, an' the way it changes An' there's the trees it was tied to; an' there's the clump he lay hid in; an' there's where he fell; an' there's where she Never mind. Wait till I come to it," said Dennis sitting upright; then took two or three quick puffs and went on.

"It's wonderful to the world," said Dennis, in that sententious way he had at times, "the difference there is in people. I often think of it. There's a whole mile between every man woman an' child in every townland; an' there's from here to Mullingar between every two nations. Ay, there is that. You're yourself, an' I'm mine, an' t'other chap has his own grip o' things; an' there's more than the sea (for that God be thanked!) keepin' England from Ireland. Take us as ye like; in farmin', in ways o' lookin' at things, in our talk, an' our songs, an our habits; we're just as much like the English these parts as a turnip's like a carrot. Ay, we are; an' I'll bring ye a proof by pointin' to the house up there an' tellin' about the men that used to own it. What happened to them would never ha' happened to one of ourselves; the way they lived, an' spoke, an'

dressed, an' carried on wasn't our way; an' if you'd meet them out there on the road, you'd turn an' look at them, an' say to yourself that the blood in them was as foreign as a Chinaman's. Ye would so . . . an' you'd be right.

"'Twas far back, years an' years ago, that the father o' them came to Meath, an' took the land you're sittin' on, an' settled down in the big house above, an' gave us all a squint at his English ways. He was a big, hard-headed, clever man; a grand farmer an' manager; open enough in the hand, a magistrate too, an' as well liked as the kind of him ever gets the chance to be . . . The wife died young; one o' the daughters went after her; t'other married a Dublin doctor an's there yet; an' when at last th' ould man went his ways, the two sons stepped into his shoes an' set themselves to carry things on.

"It's the sons I'm to tell ye about. Th' ouldest was a decent chap—Harry, they called him—big, hearty, good-lookin', free wi' his money an' his drink, an' with the best eye in the world for the points of a horse. Man, but he was the boy could ride, an' shoot, an' make the fat rise on a beast; an' in fair or market he was as good at a bargain as he was broad in the back. We liked Harry well these parts; ay, we did. He had always a good word for one, an' a laugh, an' a joke. If ye wanted advice he'd give it; if a beast was sick he'd glory in curin' it; he'd lend ye anythin' he had from a plough to a hatchet; an' no man ever went from his door wi' a slack waistcoat. But t'other—that's Ned—wasn't like that; aw, divil a bit. He was middle-sized an' dark,

an' thin o' the face, an' none too free wi' his money or his company; he'd owe a grudge against his own father an' keep it till he paid it, an' he had a temper, a black-blooded ugly temper, that came surely to him from some ould Saxon cut-throat. Ay, he was dark, was Ned. You'd never know how to take him. He couldn't look ye straight in the face. He never went to a hunt, or played cards, or stood ye a drink, or tried to make himself agreeable; he'd walk a mile wi' ye an' never open his lips, an' hardly ever did a laugh rattle in his throat An' yet there was good in him," said Dennis, and looked thoughtfully at his boots. "Aw, sure there was Only 'twas a day's journey to find it.

"Well, sir, the two o' them buries the father, gives him an' the mother a fine tombstone wi' railin's round it beyond in Moy graveyard, an' settles down in the big house above. They had room enough, Lord knows, with all them rooms an' halls an' passages, an' work enough in all them fields; an' for a while things went swimmin' with them. They were what you'd call gentlemen farmers: these kind that believe in workin' with their eyes an' wits an' keepin' their hands in their pockets. You'd never find one o' them at the tail of a plough, or bendin' a hay-fork across his knee, or sittin' down to his dinner at the back of a ditch. Aw, no. That wasn't their English way. They knew better than that. 'Twas out o' bed at day-break an' away through the fields an' the dew; 'twas back to their breakfast at six an' out again to set the men to their work; then 'twas saddle a horse an' away with Harry over the land, roamin' up an' down, here an' there—an' out after him'd go Ned, a gun on his

arm, a dog at his heels, an' not man nor mortal wi' the ghost of a notion where he was goin'. No, sir; no man could fathom Ned. You'd see Harry on the horse a mile away, an' you'd know his whereabouts by the laugh an' whistle of him; but Ned'd come upon ye as sudden as a cat on the stairs, an' him wi' his eyes down an' them burnin' holes in everything he'd see. Nothing'd escape him; an' God help the man he found wastin' a minute. He'd hardly give ye time to light your pipe; an' if so be you'd anger him he'd flare out at ye wi' English oaths that'd make ye gasp like a dyin' fish But set a woman in Ned's way, be she lady or beggarwoman, an' he'd be as soft in the tongue an' bright in the eye as a draper tryin' to sell ye a suit o' clothes. Yes; women were Ned's weakness. He liked them, an' he said he did, an' he told them so; an' sure, bein' what they are, they listened to his bleather, an' liked him too Anyway, one did, an' it's no matter about the rest; an' it's about herself I'd now be tellin' ye."

Dennis knocked the ashes from his pipe, slowly re-filled and lit it; then lay back on his elbow, crossed his legs, and looking at the foot-plank went on.

"She was the daughter of one James Long, a gentleman farmer himself and a big man in his way, that lives a mile or so beyond the road there t'other side of the railway. She had money at her back, was an only daughter; an' for the rest was a tight bouncin' lump of a lassie, wi' her share o' good looks an' ways, but, as far as ever I could see, a bit too fine in the bone an' soft in the manners for your farmer's wife. Set her down at the piano, or put her on a horse, or sit her in a big arm-

chair wi' a story book in her hand, an' she was in her glory; but give her a big churnin' o' butter to make, or a row o' cows to milk, or ask her to lend a hand at the hay when work was throng, an' where was she? Phat! She was worse than useless; she'd muddle things, be in the way, be afraid o' soilin' her hands. She was the kind o' female I have no likin' for," said Dennis. "Her an' her likes ought to be put in armchairs an' fed with spoon meat. What I like to see in a woman is good-temper, good willin' hands on her, a taste for the kitchen an' the pots an' pans; just that an' a good share o' health. Good looks," said Dennis with a snort. "White hands, an' curls an' fal-lals, an' the ways of a lady! Phat! Thinkin' o' them disgusts me." And Dennis shot upright, set his lips and glared like Brian Boru.

"Howsomever, all that's as may be," he continued, in a while; "an' just now one or another's little matter. So long as women are women an' men fools, so long I suppose will your doll's face be like a candle for the moths. Ay, it will . . . an' so it was wi' Long's daughter. The country went wild after her. You'd think 'twas the Queen o' Sheba had come to life again. Wherever ye went 'twas Letty Long this, an' Letty Long that, till ye were sick o' the name of her. You'd think she was the only woman in the countryside. 'Good-night,' you'd say to some young fellow or another you'd meet. 'Good night,' he'd answer, an' shuffle on. 'Aren't ye comin' my way?' you'd say at that. 'Aw, no,' he'd answer over his shoulder. 'I'm—I'm . . . Good night to ye, Dennis'; an' off he'd march to Long's. An' the next man you'd meet'd be goin' to Long's—an'

the next—till, 'pon me davy, you'd begin to wonder where in glory they found room round the hearthstone for all the fools. Ach, 'twas sickenin'. I have no patience wi' such foolery An' there among them Miss Letty'd sit, makin' eyes at this one, an' eyes at that, an' she in her fal-lals an' flounces; an' there the gom-erils'd sit worshipping her, an' glowerin' at one another, an' ready to cut throats for her sake. Ach, 'twas sickenin' An' withal not a finger Letty'd raise in favour o' one more than t'other—not a finger, till one night who walks in an' sits him down but my darlint Ned Smith. An' then was the scatterment. Then was the whillaloo through the countryside. It was just as if a hawk had dropped among the chickens. Everywhere ye went the jabber was in your ears. 'Ha' ye heard the news?' this one'd say an' take ye by the collar. 'Ha' ye heard about Ned Smith an'—' 'Ach, g'luck,' you'd answer an' break away; an' there before you'd be another man wi' the same story; an' when you'd get home sure your ears were tired hearin' o' the way Ned had scattered t'other fellows, an' the fine, genteel English fashion he had o' courtin', an' the way he'd read to Letty from books, an' take her for walks in the orchard, an' the things he was buyin' for her—brooches, an' hats, an' gloves—an' the glee Letty herself was in, an' the big spirits the father was in at seein' such a fine, moneyed, decent boy sittin' by his fireside: sure one's ears were tired of it all, I tell ye, sick an' tired of it. Who wants to hear o' such foolery? Who but a foreigner'd go courtin' in such fashion? Couldn't he ha' stuck his toes in the ashes like another, an' made his

kaley, an' stole an odd kiss if he wanted it now an' then, instead o' Ach," cried Dennis, "I can't spake o' such lunacy. It's beyond me. There's more time wasted these parts runnin' after women than'd do to plough the countryside twice over: but when it comes to your English way o' courtin' I'm only fit for cursin'. The foolishness of it An' Ned Smith, too; Black Ned! Sure, in a way, 'twas only pure charity when, one day, Harry casts eyes on Letty, goes to see the father, takes to visitin' at Long's, an' sets himself to rival the brother. 'Twas so But sure—but sure 'twas foolish maybe after all. Ah, it was. Think o' what came of it," said Dennis, and dolefully wagged his head. "Look round ye an' see what came of it. Look at the bare rafters up there, an' the tumbled offices, an' the bare fields: an' all because one day Harry Smith casts eyes on a woman an' sets himself to rival the brother. Isn't it powerful to the world the strange way things are managed in it? Isn't it woeful curious that women can do such things, an' men be such fools? An' doesn't it strike ye as curious, too, when ye consider all the females that's scattered over a countryside, that two brothers must cast their eyes on the same woman, an' fall to courtin' her, an' fall to treatin' other as if they were strangers—ay, an' worse than strangers? Eh," asked Dennis; "what'd ye think yourself?"

"I think with you, Dennis," said I. "It is curious—perhaps a little more than that."

"Ay," said Dennis. "Well, we'll leave it there then, for there's no use in talkin'. Maybe 'twas Providence ordered things; maybe 'twas only chance sent

Harry to Long's; maybe 'twas the divil himself; anyway, he came, an' that's enough, an' that was the beginnin' o' sport.

"Talk? The country was buzzin' with it inside a week. 'Sure the queerest thing it is,' ye heard from every one; 'the strangest thing in the world. Think o' the two Smiths after the one girl—think o' one brother tryin' to oust t'other—think o' me darlint Letty sittin' yonder wi' glowerin' Ned this side of her an' laughin' Harry t'other side, an' them as keen to outdo one another as if they were biddin' for the same horse at a fair. An' listen,' they'd say to ye an' look at ye that knowin', 'there'll be sport afore all's over, an' there'll be murder as sure as Heaven's above ye, if so be Harry wins. There will, I tell ye. An' listen: It'll not be Harry that'll give the blow, an' it'll not be Ned that'll win. Is it Ned Smith win, black-faced Ned? Ah, not at all; not at all But wait! There'll be sport as sure as the sun's shinin', or the divil isn't sittin' in Ned Smith's eyes.'

"That was how people talked; an' maybe they had cause, for wasn't the whole play-actin' goin' on there before their eyes. Couldn't they see Ned steppin' off after dusk—an' him bound for Long's? Couldn't they hear the tramp o' Harry's horse most evenin's—an' it off for Long's? Couldn't this one see this for himself, an' that one that: an', for yourself, hadn't ye only to meet Ned any evenin' an' look in his face to see trouble in his eyes? Ah, to be sure An', Lord knows, 'twas hard not to pity him. For what chance had he against Harry from the very first day?

Chance! About as much as a terrier has against a bulldog. Chance! He had none. Is it against big, hearty, good-natured, good-lookin' Harry; an' him the eldest; an' him a magistrate; an' him the finest match from top to toe that stepped in county Meath? Chut. It's ridiculous to think of it. A blind woman'd choose Harry from a houseful o' Neds. She had only to hear him laugh, or lay her hand on his shoulder, or sit listenin' to him one night by the fire, an' the thing was done. Ay, done. An' Letty wasn't blind, nor the father, nor one of his kind. Ah, 'deed they weren't. They knew how many ha'pence made a penny, an' how to cut a meadow when the sky was blue; an' so it happened just as everyone expected, for one day word came that Ned was out on the step, an' Harry inside in the hall, an' Letty at Harry's side an' the fox of a father blessin' them An' God knows, for myself, I pitied the poor divil of a Ned; for he had his good points, an' was first in the field, an' the brother did the mean thing an' the unnatural to come steppin' between him an' his girl. 'Twas the chances o' war, I know: still, God knows, I pitied the white face o' him first time I met him after his downfall. I did," said Dennis. "God knows, I did.

"He took it ill, as bad as man ever did; not in an open, blusterin', dang your eyes kind o' way—the way, you'll understand, men take such things in these parts—but just as if you'd bled the blood from him, or killed the heart in him, or cut him with insults to the very quick. The day ould Long refused him Letty, he just rose from his chair, took his hat, an' wi' his face like ashes walked out

wi'out a word, an' turned for home. An' that night he didn't speak, nor the next day, an' hardly a word for weeks an' weeks; an' when Harry comes to him wi' his hand out, an' the cheerful word on his tongue, an' him askin' for forgiveness, Ned just shivered in his boots, wheeled round, an' marched off to the fields. Nothin'd make him laugh. He shunned everyone. The only thing he'd speak to or look at was the dog. If Harry met him, he'd turn his head an' pass; if he'd speak, Ned'd nod an' tighten the lips. He had his meals by himself. He went about like a ghost, his head down, his hands behind him, an' his eyes burnin' An', God knows, I pitied him. He was foolish an' hard to understand, an' sure no woman ever born was worth such sufferin': for all that I was sorry for the boy, an' there wasn't a woman in the county but cried bitter tears for him, an' not a man but was angry with Harry in his heart. But if ye spoke to Harry—an' some of us did too—he'd only laugh at ye; an' if ye dared pity Ned he'd stare at ye An' so things went on.

"'Twas a great weddin'—the finest thing o' the kind I ever set eyes on. People came from all parts to it, from Dublin, the North, sorrow knows where. There were as many carriages, with prancin' horses, an' the drivers sportin' bookays in their coats, as you'd see at the funeral of a landlord. Outside the church, was a crowd as big as if 'twas election day. An' there was herself all muslin an' flowers; an' there was Harry in his coat wi' skirts to it; an' there were the beautiful bridesmaids, an' the ould father in his white hat, an' the friends in their Sunday best—aw, an odious fine

gatherin' entirely But there was no Ned, not a sight of him; an' we all nudged other at that. 'Where's Ned?' we'd say, wi' our eyes on the carriages; 'where's Ned?' An' the women'd wipe their eyes an' say: 'Ah, the poor crature; the poor, unfortunate crature!' An' if some of us muttered a word of a curse, may God who knows what happened afterwards forgive us. Sure it must ha' been hard on the boy; it must. To wake up an' think, 'She'll be married the day'; to see Harry steppin' off in his grandeur an' know where he was goin'; to look at his watch an' think, 'She's marryin' now'; to sit up yonder in his room an' know that the knives an' forks were clatterin' in Long's parlour, an' the corks poppin', an' everyone laughin' an' speechyfyin'; to hear, at last, the carriage come back, an' Harry runnin' up the stairs an' knockin' at the door, an' then Letty the wife knockin' an' sayin', 'Ned, Ned, won't ye speak to me? Won't ye wish us well?'—an' him to sit there an' never answer or stir; then, in the end, to look out o' the window an' see them drivin' off to the honeymoon—sure, aw, sure, for a man like Ned to have to pass such a day, must ha' been purgatory itself. It must The foolish boy. An' yet, God knows, when I heard all I pitied him. Ah, I did.

"Anyway, the weddin' passed, an' the honeymoon; an' then one day home comes Letty as Mrs. Smith an' settles down as mistress in the big house. She did it well; carried the thing off, they say, as if she was English born and used all her life to grandeur; went laughin' an' singin' about the house, made herself agreeable to the servants an' everyone—ay, to everyone but Ned. No;

she couldn't charm Ned, for he wouldn't come near her. If she'd step into a room when he was there he'd walk out; if he met her outside he'd raise his hat and pass on; when meals were ready he'd stay away: an' do what Harry might he couldn't get Ned to forgive him or make it up wi' the wife. No. It was just wi' Ned as if Letty wasn't there at all, or the brother had disgraced the name by marryin' a beggarwoman. He'd recognise her in no form or fashion. He'd have no dealin's wi' Harry more than if he was the common hangman. 'Twas the talk o' the country. 'Think o' the wasp's nest that's above in the big house,' we used to say. 'What, in glory's name, 'll come of it all?' we'd ask. 'What'll Harry do? What's brewin' back there behind Ned's eyes? How can Letty stand such a life?' we'd ask . . . and then, just like that," said Dennis with a clap of his hands, "comes word that Letty'd settled it all: just stepped up to Ned, one day, put her hands on his shoulders, looked in his eyes, said a word or two—an' the thing was done . . . Ay, the thing was done. Ned was changed. Him an' Letty were friends at last. 'Twas curious," said Dennis; "mighty curious. But sure . . . Ah, what's the good o' talkin'?" said Dennis. "Who can understand the ways o' women? Who can fathom the foolishness o' men? An' what's the meanin', I'd ask ye, o' bein' friends wi' the wife an' t'other thing wi' the husband—an' him your own brother? Eh? What's the meanin' of it? I'd ask ye.

"Anyway, after that things settled down. People turned their eyes to their own affairs—maybe 'twas time, too—an' let the Smiths alone. Everything seemed

goin' well at the big house. An odd word o' scandal ye heard now an' then: but sure that's of no account in a countryside. Ye met Harry in fair or market, an' he was much the same—maybe a wee thing too fat, an' red in the face, an' worried lookin' at times—but nothin' to make ye pass a remark. Ye had sight o' Letty drivin' to church, or the father's, an' she was just as well-dressed, an' good-lookin', an' genteel as ever. If ye met Ned on the road, an' looked hard at him, an' passed the time o' day, you'd say to yourself: 'Well, good luck to ye, Ned Smith, but it's well you've got over your troubles considerin' all the capers ye cut.' The servants an' one an' another about the house gave out that husband an' wife were good friends enough (as good as you'd expect any man an' woman to be after a month or so), an' Ned an' the wife on the best o' terms, an' the brothers themselves as civil in their ways as could be expected. Everything, to all appearance, was goin' on as smooth as milk; when, just as sudden as the wind risin' at sunset, comes word that Ned an' Harry had quarrelled one night, an' fought like divils, an' called other all the names in the dictionary, an' smashed nearly all the chairs in the room, an' were only kept from black murder by Letty herself. 'Ho, ho,' says we at that; 'who says now that Ned's forgiven the brother? An' what,' says one here an' there, wi' a wink, 'was Letty doin' in the ruction? Eh? Tell me,' they'd say, an' wink again; 'd'ye think it was about *herself* they'd be squabblin'? Eh?' An' before we could scratch our ears for an answer, word comes that Ned had packed his trunk, shook his feet at Harry, took his

ticket at Moy, an' gone off to England on his travels. 'An' a good thing too,' says some o' us; 'an' may he never come back.' 'An' what'd Letty do then?' says the rest of us an' grinned. 'Ah, wait an' see; wait an' see.' An' we waited.

"He was gone a year an' a while; an' when he came back—an' God knows, I often wonder in myself what divil sent him—things were changed a trifle in the house above. A child had come, for one thing. Letty had got well used to married ways, for another; an', as women will, had learnt maybe that there's a bitter side to the skin of a plum. Harry, too, had settled down in his shoes and taken to curious ways—drinkin' more than he wanted, card playin' o' nights at the neighbours', givin' one the notion he was fonder o' the next man's hearthstone than his own. People said, too, that there were squabbles between them, an' bad looks, an' bad temper; an' more than one said 'twas Letty that asked Ned to come back . . . but of all that I know nothin'. All I'd swear to is this: that when Ned came back from his travels he had plenty o' chance to carry on his divilments; an' that he took his chance; an' that before six weeks were past the whole country was buzzin' like a beehive wi' scandal, an' jabber, an' hints, an' the sorrow knows what. 'Ha' ye heard about the Smiths?' was the word everywhere; 'about Harry neglectin' the wife, an' Ned takin' up wi' her, an' them always singin' an' laughin' an' talkin' together, an' him always lookin' at her . . .' Ach, what's the good o' goin' through it all?" cried Dennis, irritably. "Who can tell the truth about things? Who but themselves knew what passed

between them? Who knows which o' them was to blame? Who knows whether 'twas the ould grudge against the brother, or the new feelin's for the wife, that tempted Ned? An' who but the Almighty knows the whole truth o' what passed between them on that last night of all; the night I'm now goin' to tell ye about? No child o' man knows, anyway. It's folly to be guessin'. If I talked all night I might just be as far from the truth as ever. It's unknowable;" said Dennis, with a shake of his head; "it's unknowable.

"Harry was out as usual," Dennis went on quickly, "an' the two it seems were up in the parlour singin' an' passin' the time. After a while, it appears, they fell quiet; then Ned's voice was heard ravin' an' rantin' in an unnatural kind o' way, an' Letty's askin' him for God's sake to be quiet, an' for God's sake to leave her alone. But Ned, it appears, kept on; an' Letty takes to sobbin', then all of a sudden calls out, 'No, no, no, Ned; don't go, Ned; don't go'—an' with that the door opens, Ned comes out, an' down the hall, an' out through the kitchen into the yard. An' after him, inside a minute, comes Letty; only she takes a shawl, wraps it round her head, turns through the front door, an' as fast as she could go comes straight down the hill there in front of us

"I've often sat me down just where I'm sittin' now," Dennis went on, "an' shut my eyes an' seen it all as plain as if I'd been watchin' it. You'll imagine a dark night, in early spring, after a time o' heavy rains. The stream there is full to the brim, an' runnin' like a mill race; the trees are as bare as scaffold poles; the grass is



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short and slippery; there's a mist lyin' all along the valley here, an' there's not a sound or a stir more than if the world was empty. Now, lift your eyes an' you'll see Letty comin' down the hill, wi' the shawl over her head, an' her pantin' an' slippin' an' all frightened like—comin' on to the plank there, crossin' it in her timid woman's way, an' passin' on through the fields at your back. Ye wait a while, wonderin' where she's goin'; then raise your eyes again an' see Ned comin' in her steps, his face like a divil's, a lantern in one hand an' a rope in the other. He comes on, an' on, an' on; crosses the plank too; sets the lantern on the bank there just about where your sittin'; looks here an' there about him, listens for a while, then lights the lantern an' quick an' sudden begins unwindin' the rope from his arm Am I tellin' it right?" asked Dennis. "Can ye see it all?"

"Clearly," answered L. "But go on, my son; go on."

"Well, sir, he takes one end o' the rope an' ties it low down an' tight to the tree over there beyond the plank; then comes this side o' the plank an' winds t'other end round the foot o' that tree, pulls on it hard an' knots it—an' there's the rope stretched taut about six inches from the ground just over the end o' the plank Can ye see it? Ye can. Well, now can ye imagine the divil's capers he's after? Ye can't. Well, look hard at the rope, an' then imagine yourself to be Harry comin' home in the dark, your hands in your pockets, a drop o' drink in your stomach, an' you catchin' your toe in somethin' just as ye made

to step on the plank Eh! Ye understand now! It's kind o' shivery to think of, isn't it! Ah, my God, but it is! Man, but I've been through it often—but I've been through it often An' there's Ned standin' lookin' at it wi' a grin on his divil's face. Ah, what possessed him that night! How could he even come to think o' such a thing! His own flesh an' blood—his brother—his own brother Harry! Was it the ould grudge against him that had been growin' darker an' stronger all those months; or was it a sudden madness o' the brain; or did Satan tempt him; or was it all because o' Letty, the old feelin's for her, an' the new, an' the regard he had for her! What was it! Ah, sir, sir! Who knows! Who knows! It's beyond me. It's unknowable

“But, no matter now; no matter now; let's get it over, for God's sake! Sit ye back now, I'd ask ye, an' clear the way for Harry. But keep your eye on Ned. Look. He puts his foot on the rope an' tries it; smiles to himself; lifts the lantern an' blows it out; then walks conny to the hazel-clump over there, jouks down an' sets himself to wait like a spider in the corner of his web. Whisht. Ye can nearly hear him breathin'. Ah, the divil, the divil! He waits, an' waits. Ah, the divil! Whisht. There's a step behind us. Ah, Lord, Lord! It comes nearer an' nearer now it's close to us now it's on the bank now it's at the plank now— Ah, Lord, Lord! There's a stumble—a slip—a cry—a plunge an' a splash—another cry—an' all's over All's over, sir,” moaned Dennis; then took off his hat, devoutly crossed himself,

mopped his brow and silently sat looking down upon the water—the water that now ran so peacefully.

“Go on, Dennis,” said I in a while. “Finish, my son.”

“Eh?” said he, turning. “What’s that? Ah, yes—I’ll finish—give me breath—I’ll finish After that there must ha’ passed a good while before himself over there stirred in the hazel-clump: but at last he comes steppin’ out, looks here an’ there, creeps over to the bank, an’ stands listenin’ an’ listenin’. But he hears nothin’. Ah, no. Not a whimper; not a splash. He walks along the bank towards the bridge, peepin’ here an’ there through the willows; then comes back hurryin’, lights the lantern again, puts it near the rope an’ begins untyn’ the knot. He fumbles, for his hands are tremblin’. Maybe he swears an oath; maybe he— But whisht. Is that a foot? He turns his head an’ listens. Whisht. It is a foot. He twists round with his back to the lantern; someone shouts; he jumps as if a shot had hit him and there’s Harry. Yes; Harry himself Wait now. Hear me out. I’m nearly done. Not a word can Ned say. Just like a post he stands there, not a move on him, an’ the eyes starin’ in his head. Harry walks up to him.

“‘Well, Ned,’ says he, or words like that. ‘You’ll be out late?’

“But Ned stands speechless.

“‘Were ye waitin’ for me, Ned?’ Harry goes on, or words like that. ‘Someone told me ye might have somethin’ to say to me on my way home.’

“Not a word from Ned.

“ ‘What d’ye want wi’ the lantern, Ned?’ asks Harry; an’ looks down, an’ catches sight o’ the rope. He stoops an’ pulls at it; then raises himself an’ looks Ned in the eyes. ‘Ah, ye divil ye,’ says he; ‘this is what you’d be after. This is what you’ve been keepin’ in store for me. Ah, my God, that it should come to this! You—you! This is what you’d be doin’;’ says Harry. ‘This is what she came to warn me about. She knew ye; she guessed’ An’ at the word Ned speaks.

“ ‘She,’ he shouts. ‘She! Who—who—who?’

“An for answer Harry stands back an’ hits Ned full in the forehead, an’ stretches him along the bank there at your feet; then steps across the rope, along the plank, an’ away uphill home to find the wife But he didn’t find her. Ah, no. Not for hours did he find her; an’ then ’twas lyin’ in the river there with her clothes tangled in a branch Ah, dear Lord; dear Lord!”

Dennis rose, stretched himself; began tapping his pipe on the palm of his hand. “So now you’ll be knowin’,” he continued, “why it comes that the house above——”

I rose also and took Dennis by the arm. “Easy, Dennis,” said I; “easy, my son. Tell me all. Had she been to warn Harry?”

“Ah, to be sure she had—to be sure. She must ha’ suspected Ned of his divilments; maybe she knew; maybe she didn’t. Who knows? Anyway, she did her best: ah, God help her, she did!”

“And Ned?” said I.

“He got over it,” answered Dennis, “in a kind of a way. He lay on his back, ravin’ an’ jumpin’, for weeks



an' weeks; an' when the fit passed he was only a wreck—no memory an' little wits. Maybe 'twas God's mercy; maybe 'twas a kind o' punishment. Anyway, that was the end o' Ned. An' here's the end of it all," said Dennis, pointing towards the house and looking round the fields; "ruin an' desolation—ruin an' desolation. Ah, sir, to think of it all. The fine place it was once. An' now; an' now . . . Why? ye ask. Heaven above, haven't I told ye! Isn't there blood on it—an' a curse! Didn't Harry throw up the land before six months, an' take Ned off to England? Didn't the next man keep it less than a year, an' lose half his cattle with a murrain, an' half his crop in a tempest? Didn't the next man break his neck at a hunt; an' the man after him lose a child in that very river, an' have to do his own labour for want of man or woman to help him? An', for the rest, doesn't the ghost of herself—God be with her—go flittin' about here at night, up an' down, up an' down . . . Ah, come away," cried Dennis; "come away. It makes me sweat to think of it."

Jan finished; sat a while looking at the heather; looked round. "It's a lively kind o' yarn, isn't it?" said he.

"It is," answered I. "And you blame the woman?"

"I do," said Jan, rising. "Don't you?"

And to that I dared not answer. As Dennis said: God knows.



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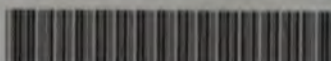
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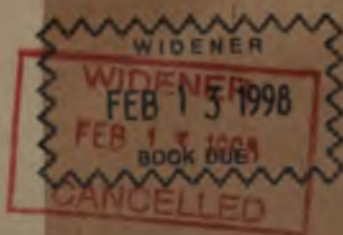
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